

GAMEFORMER

THE WORLD'S #1 COMPUTER GAME MAGAZINE



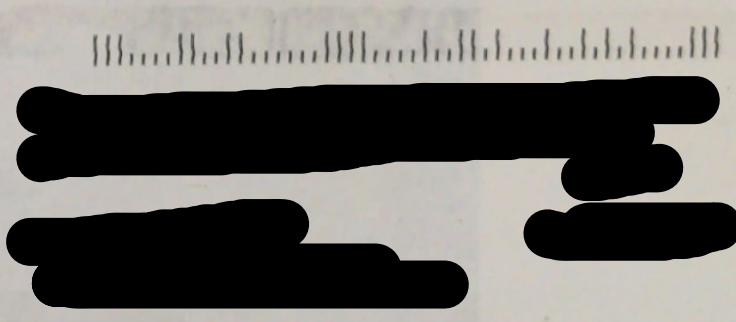
Niko Bellic Stars
In Rockstar's
Gritty Take On The
American Dream

ISSUE 169

MAY 2007

grand
theft
auto IV

TEN PAGES OF
WORLD EXCLUSIVE
SCREENS & DETAILS ON
THE BIGGEST GAME OF 2007

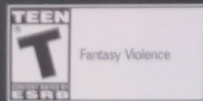


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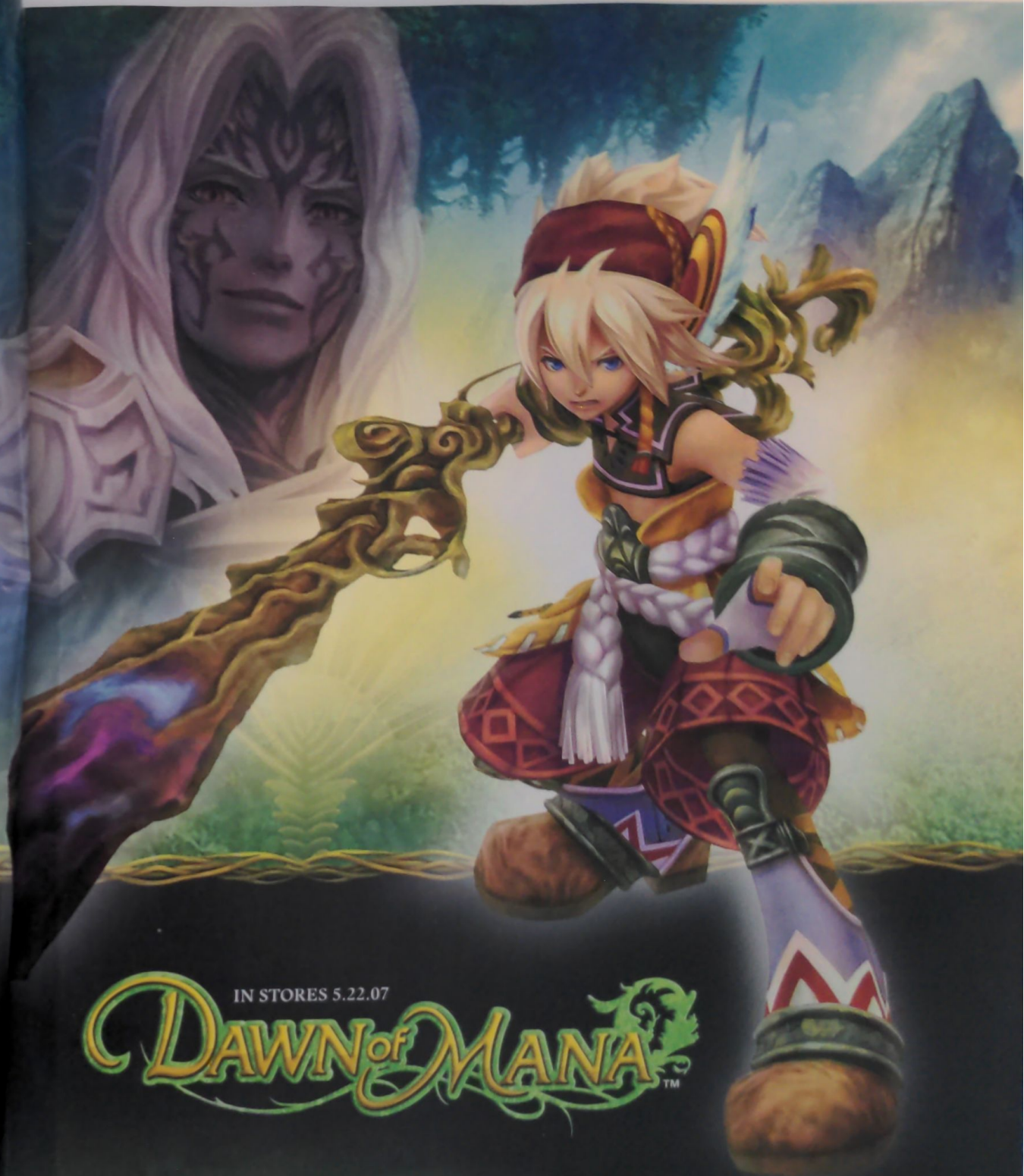
To dig deeper, visit na.square-enix.com/dawnofmana



PlayStation 2

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IN STORES 5.22.07

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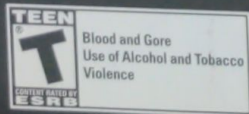
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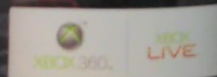
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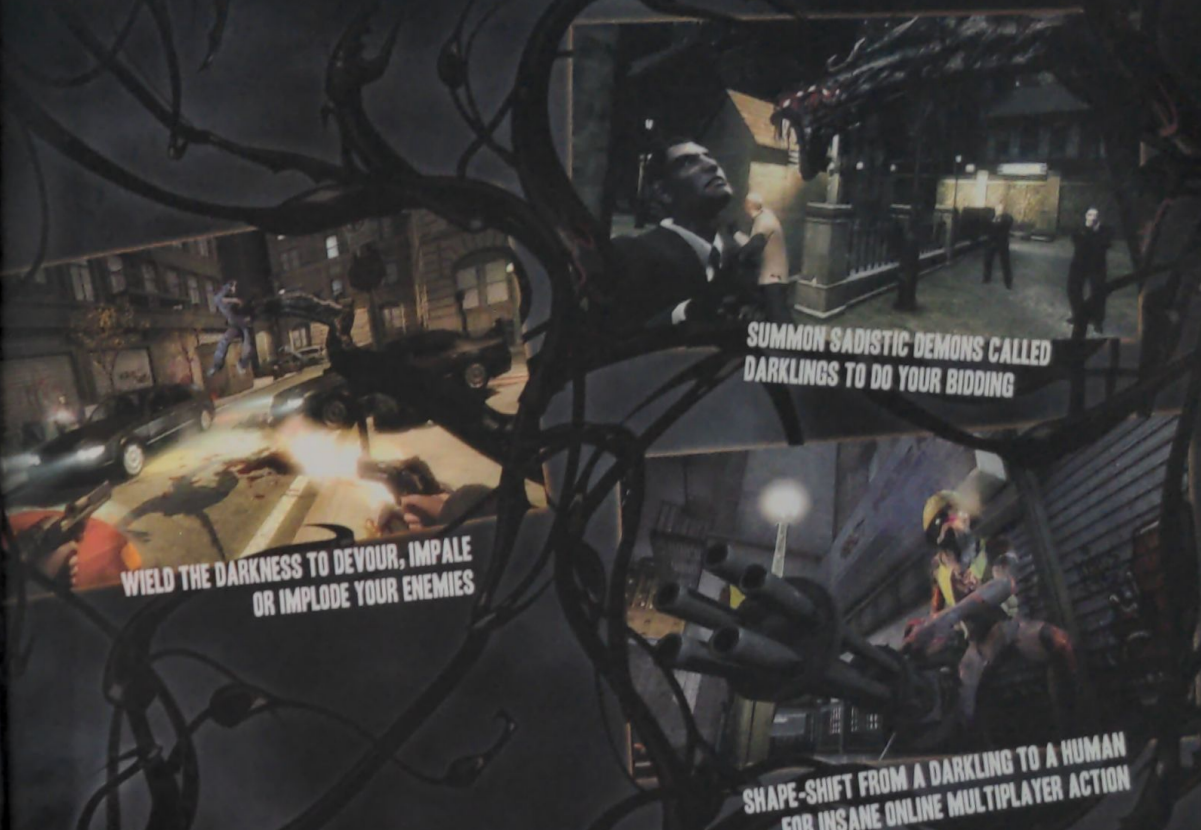
Lucky, lucky boy.
Haven't you guessed, Jackie?
You are *The Darkness*.
You have the *Power*.
You can do *Anything*.
And you'll *pay the price*.



PLAYSTATION 3



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JUNE 2007





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What more do we need to say? Developer/publisher Rockstar opened its doors to us, and we came out with the story. We have the world-exclusive first look at the next incarnation of the undisputed biggest franchise in gaming. Get the first real details on Grand Theft Auto IV right here, right now.



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52 ALL-PRO FOOTBALL 2K8

The EA Sports-NFL licensing deal didn't kill rival 2K Sports' football game, it just drove it underground. We have the exclusive first look at how 2K is getting around the legal restrictions to put out its own brand of football.

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THIS MAN LOVES SHEEP.



AND THAT IS COMPLETELY NORMAL. HE HAS DEVOTED HIS LIFE TO THE HEALTH AND PROTECTION OF THESE TRUSTING, SOFT, SWEET, WOOL-GIVING CREATURES. HE IS A DECENT MAN. SO JUST CALM DOWN, HE HAS A GIRLFRIEND.

KEEP it CLEAN.



Old Spice

STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



THREE MILLION GAMERS CAN'T BE WRONG

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I find it funny that almost daily I read about how print is dead on some Internet site. It's like they have nothing better to do than belittle their competition, rather than compete.

To the naysayers: Magazines are here to stay, whether the Internet likes it or not. I realize that the reverse is also true; the Internet is a big part of how gamers get their information and discuss the issues of the day. Yet, I see this argument come up often, and I have never quite understood the giant battle between the two.

People ask me how I feel about how the Internet has changed video game reporting, half expecting me to start a grumpy tirade — complete with the “in my day, we walked uphill, both ways, in the snow to get to school” anecdote. This is simply not the case. I think the Internet just gives us more ways to communicate with gamers, and for gamers to communicate with each other, which in the end makes it easier to make a better magazine.

I actually enjoy the avenues that open up to us when creating a magazine. In the early days of Game Informer, we spent a lot of time and effort cramming as much news into an issue as we possibly could. Thankfully, regurgitating every minor press release is no longer our charge. Magazines are about the big picture. This lets us do more in-depth reporting and analysis. We can look at what is and what isn't important to the gamer today, and find the stories that we think are shaping gaming now and for the future.

I think we are accomplishing this goal. As of this issue, Game Informer will send magazines to 3 million gamers. For those of you keeping score at home, that's the biggest video game magazine in the world...and by a wide margin. And of course, this month we have the biggest story in video games gracing our cover: Grand Theft Auto IV. Game Informer will always have the biggest stories on the biggest games, and I can promise you that we will work harder than ever to make sure that no matter what the Internet says, magazines are still here to report on games unlike anyone else, and before anyone else.

Enjoy the issue.

Andy >> andy@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** 24, Guitar Hero Mastery (Damn You Solos On Expert! Damn You To Hell!), 300, Bone (The Comic, And Take Your Mind Out Of The Gutter) **Dislikes:** Final Fantasy XII Bugging Out And Refusing To Let Me Bring Up The Menu Where You Change Your Gambits And Inventory (And Yes, I Mean That One Where You Do Basically Everything) Two Hours Away From The End **Current Favorite Games:** God Of War II, World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, Guitar Hero II (Xbox 360)



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Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** PlayStation 3's Home (BBQs Every Day At My Place!), Randomly Injecting “Bo Knows” And “Where's The Beef” Into Serious Conversations, Patrick Stewart On Extras (Funniest Thing Ever!) **Dislikes:** Being A Part Of A Two-Hour Discussion On The Search For Spock, The Punisher's New Stars & Stripes Costume, SD Television (Get With The Times, People) **Current Favorite Games:** Grand Theft Auto IV, Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2, God Of War II, Earth Defense Force 2017



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Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** Fantasy Baseball Drafts, Playing Baseball With New And Improved Lung Power, Trolling The Warlock Boards (Note To Lods: You're Still Overpowered), Eating Things That Are Delicious **Dislikes:** When Delicious Things Make My Tummy Asplode, Websites That Don't Work With Firefox (Cmon, Like Anybody Uses IE Any More), Trying To Convince My PS2 To Not Look Horrid On My HDTV **Current Favorite Games:** Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars, S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl, World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, Lumines Live



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Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** Teaming Through 24 Like A Machine, XKCD, 300, Hiding Crappy Games (Like Fuzion Frenzy 2) On People's Desks, The Great Game Informer Ban-Off **Dislikes:** Chocobos, Waiting To Conquer The Universe In Spore (My Guys Are Going To Have So Many Mouths), Mrs. Luther, No New 2D Metroid **Current Favorite Games:** Mass Effect, God Of War II, Final Fantasy XII, Titan Quest: Immortal Throne, Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney, Earth Defense Force 2017



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Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Lunch Negotiations (We'll Never Come Together Until We Learn To Understand Each Other In Multilateral Talks), Jack Bauer's Body Count (He May Very Well Be Considered A Serial Killer In Some Cultures), The Popcorn Fairy (Please Visit Our Office Again!) **Dislikes:** Joe Pushing Fuzion Frenzy 2 Like It's A Drug, Snow Shoveling In March, Tax Preparation (Still Not As Bad As Fuzion Frenzy 2) **Current Favorite Games:** Fallout, Final Fantasy XII, Crackdown, God Of War II, Dig Dug



Bertz >> mattbertz@gameinformer.com

Handle: Lord Gammington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** 300, Final Episodes Of The Sopranos, Andrew Bird's Armchair Apocrypha, Pending Ted Leo Concert, St. Patrick's Day Festivities **Dislikes:** Fighting Off Bryan's Sickness, Missing Shane McGowan Performing From A Wheelchair On St. Patrick's Day, Missing St. Patrick's Day Altogether Due To Bryan's Sickness **Current Favorite Games:** Crackdown, S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl, Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2, The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles



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Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Rhythm **Interests:** Shamrock Shakes, 300, Showing The Old-Timers (Kato And Matt) What The Kids Are Listening To, Timing How Long It Takes Until Their Headphones Go Flying Across The Bullpen **Dislikes:** That Flu That's Going Around (Okay, So Maybe I Started It), The Fact That I Curse Every PSP I Touch, That Extras Is Ending **Current Favorite Games:** Super Paper Mario, LittleBigPlanet, Kororinpa: Marble Mania, The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess, TMNT 1989 Arcade

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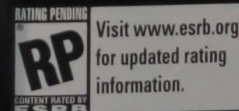
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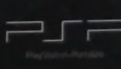
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Wii



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1 Billy snuggles up to The Legend of Zelda kingpin Eiji Aonuma at GDC 2 Freelance journalist Scott Jones hangs with Konami PR maestro Marc Franklin 3 Publisher Gamecock welcomes attendees to its GDC party in memorable fashion! Watch for Cirque de Soleil: Dorque coming to a city near you 4 Andy and Bryan max, relax, ill, and chill with LucasArts' Chris Baker and Adam Kahn 5 Jurassic 5 and Ozomatli DJ Cut Chemist spins end-to-end burners at Sony's GDC party 6 Billy with his posse: Konami's Kyoko Fukuhara, Bender/Helper's Adam Fenton, Elebits creator Shingo Mukaitoge (holding Flat Stanley), Bender/Helper's Marisa Gross, and our own Adam! 7 Former GI editor Jay Fitzloff, now of Sandbox Strat, accepts a regal greeting from Sony's Mariam Sughayer 8 Just another day of "work" for Game Informer editor Bryan Vore, pictured here working on a story about PlayStation 3 backwards compatibility



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5



STOP THE SPREAD OF EVIL

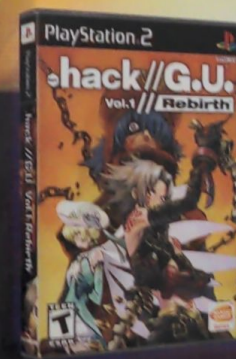
THE YEAR IS 2017, AND SERVERS OF THE POPULAR VIDEO GAME

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GI COMMUNITY

Game Informer has a thriving online community, and this is where they can sound off about issues facing the gaming industry today

THE QUESTION: *Attention-seeking gameplay: in fact or the future?*

It's a fact until they light up the gamepads. A lot of the games... like from poor controls and... they're detection. Twilight Princess is an example of just how good they can be, while Red Steel is how bad it can get.



Red Steel

It's the future. PS3 has it, the Wii has it, and I'm pretty sure, given the fact, the Xbox 360 will have a million-seeming variations of some type.

It's a fact with potential. If it can be used in many fun ways in games, like with Twilight Princess, it can be something truly remarkable. However, now it seems like the majority of games use it like a gimmick and don't go very far beyond shaking and pointing.

Make the Majora

It's the next evolution in video games. No matter how many poorly controlled games come out, there will always be that one game that makes you think, "Wow, this is how video games should be played."

God of Destruction

For now it just seems like a fad. It's there, and offers a new way to play games, but I'll be happy as long as I have my good of control when the alternative starts to get gimmicky.

boogie man 29

It's definitely the future. Where else are video games to go but on the route of incorporating players into the experience at a deeper level? Remember the PlayStation 2 commercials that showed PlayStation 2's engraving technology? It has to begin somewhere.

erikenbrand

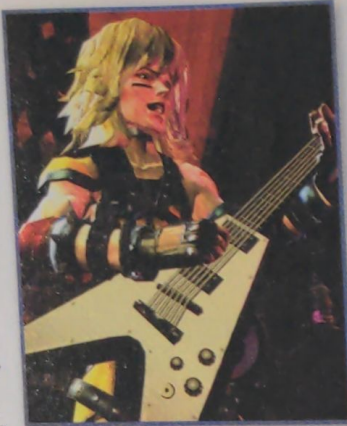


Do you want to make your voice heard? Weigh in with your opinion at www.gameinformer.com/forums

TO BE A ROCK AND NOT TO ROLL

While, I agree with some of the songs you chose for the top ten songs to be in Guitar Hero III, I do feel you missed a song that should have at least made an honorable mention: "Hotel California." It starts with a lengthy guitar riff, and finishes with a faster riff at the end of the song. I highly doubt I'm the only one who wants to rock to The Eagles' classic hit.

Stevie Manning
Via sbcglobal.net



for Matchbox 20 and Korn songs). Oh, and to clear up Andrew's point: Lynrd Skynyrd didn't make the list because "Freebird" was basically the last boss of Guitar Hero II. As to the "No Stairway" rule...well, we think the phrasing there is open to interpretation. You know, sometimes words have two meanings.

THE GREAT PURGE

There was a time when Game Informer devoted

the bulk of its pages to actual reviews. Yet over the past few years, I've seen more and more fluff stories and lavish previews creep in. I just received my March issue, and at first I couldn't even find the review section since it was only 11 pages. If you guys are that pressed for space, here's what you can do: cut the industry articles (no one cares), big previews, classic game reviews, Dear GI, the trivia section, and the walkthroughs and cheats. Will people miss those sections? Sure, but you can only publish a finite number of pages – and you're devoting too few to the reviews.

Erin Jeffreys
Via gmail.com

■ Hey, yeah! We've been so stupid all this time, assuming that our readers care about the coolest upcoming titles, the biggest industry happenings, and gaming as a hobby in general. Everyone just wants cold, hard review scores, minus any bothersome context or perspective. Never mind the fact that some months only have a handful of games hitting retail shelves. For those months, we'll just pad the remaining pages with pictures of kittens interacting with everyday objects in humorous ways. Here's the only problem

No Stairway!

Anonymous
Via aol.com

■ Here's a little tip if you ever decide to publish your own gaming magazine: There's nothing quite like a top ten list to get people fired up. The gaming community's pervasive love of Guitar Hero led to a massive response to our Guitar Hero III wish list. We just want to say thanks to all of you who sent us complaints, videos, and personal picks (though you would be saddened to see the number of suggestions

JUDGING A BOOK

I have a problem and I hope your friendly Game Informers have an answer for me. I was recently browsing your magazine for the latest and greatest video games, and I noticed that all of your cover stories are titles from some big kahuna. LucasArts, Rockstar, EA, and Ubisoft – they seem to get a lot of attention. Why not choose a promising underdog, like BioWare?

Alex MacDonald
Allendale, Michigan

■ A proven never-miss developer like BioWare should hardly be considered an underdog (the developer's Jade Empire appeared on the cover of issue 126), but you bring up a good point. The truth is that we make an effort to spotlight games that may be under most gamers' radars, like BioShock, Dark Sector, or Kane & Lynch. In the grand scheme of things, our covers on high-profile games (like this month's GTA story) may be more memorable, but we still love to throw our support behind lesser-known games that we think will be awesome.



with this strategy: If we cut the Dear GI section, where would people write to complain about our Sonic and Dragon Ball Z scores?

PROBLEMS UNLOCKED

I want to talk to you about Reiner's opinion piece in issue 167. I think Achievements are a great way to show off to your friends how good you are at games. However, what about cheaters? A friend and I have been known to "cheat" at some Achievements. For example, to get the 10 kills Achievement in Rainbow Six Vegas, we just set up a player match and I let my friend kill me 10 times, and then he let me kill him 10 times. Don't get me wrong, my Gamerscore is over 13,000 and I get most of them honestly (you can't fake beating Call of Duty 2 and 3 on Veteran), but there are plenty of ways you can up your Gamerscore with little effort.

Andre Toro
Via hotmail.com

In issue 167 there was an article called "The X-Factor" that praised the Xbox 360's achievement point system. I agree with this in some ways; it helps prolong single-player games. Achievements can add hours to games in the RPG or Adventure genres. That's not the problem for me. My grievances are with Achievements based in the multiplayer modes of games. For example, in Gears of War there are many points to be gained from defeating opponents online with different weapons and in different ways. Multiplayer games are about cooperation and teamwork, and having these sorts of objectives can break teams apart. I don't know how many times I've been told not to pick up a certain weapon because a player was working on an Achievement, or being accused of stealing a kill when it was better for the team if I finish an enemy off. The bottom line is this: There should be no Achievements in online multiplayer – they discourage teamwork and make the multiplayer experience nothing more than a number game.

Thomas Hult
Newport Center, VA

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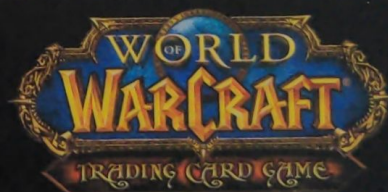
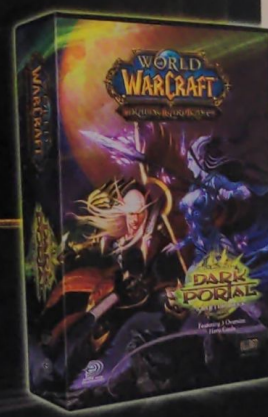


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Lazy Peons enters play exhausted. Exhaust Lazy Peons to complete this quest. Reward: Draw a card.

"Stop poking me!"

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■ We'll admit that Microsoft's Achievement system isn't perfect, but it is impossible to deny that it is influencing the way we play games. With the PlayStation 3's Home tapping into similar concepts (see our story on page 16), it seems as though they will become a staple of the industry moving forward. Quantifiable rewards, whether they be trophies or a Gamerscore, give gamers additional incentive to fully explore multiple angles of their games. There are still some kinks to iron out, like the ability to cheat and the weight of online components. If the success of Achievements so far is any indication, it is safe to assume that they'll be around for a while, leaving plenty of time for improvement.

ANOTHER HOT BUTTON

In March I read your article about the Columbine game, and it showed me that we – as gamers – are being singled out as second-rate citizens. We seem to have one less right than everyone else: the right of free speech. Although I believe the game was in poor taste, Super Columbine Massacre RPG was meant to provoke discussion about disturbing issues that are still prevalent in our nation. I found it disappointing how easily the game was pulled and how little resistance was offered. It is incredibly frustrating that some people have made it their mission to regulate what games others can make or play based on some misguided notion of moral superiority.

Thomas Ward
Wharton, New Jersey

I am writing in reference to the Super Columbine Massacre RPG article. I feel that, in not truly examining the position against the game, you support the idea that anything is permissible under the label of "art." What comes from that notion are products of this ilk – games that play around with serious issues, trying to shield themselves from criticism under the banner of artistic expression. This specific example of "artistic expression" is no more than somebody getting jollies out of stirring up a ruckus. If this game is trying to promulgate the idea that getting picked on in school justifies mass murder, I feel you owe it to readers to present this point.

Alex Gajkov
Redford, MI

■ The tragic events of Columbine still resonate with many people, which is part of the reason behind the polarized reactions to Danny Ledonne's Super Columbine Massacre RPG. While we can't say whether the decision to pull the game from the Slamdance Guerilla Gamemaker Contest was right or wrong, it seems like there are some misconceptions that should be cleared up. SCMRPG was not created as a commercial title. It was never intended to hit retail shelves. Think of it like an experimental film, intended for a specific audience; the mere fact that the game exists in some form doesn't mean that 8-year-olds will be buying the DS version tomorrow. It should also be noted that SCMRPG attempts to examine the actions of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, not glorify or justify them. On the other hand, even though the SCMRPG is intended to be a social commentary, what is permissible under that definition will differ from person to person. For many, regardless of intention, the content in any context simply crosses the line.

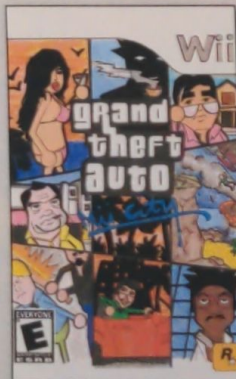
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We are purchasing front row tickets to this fight right now



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"Till the night closes in...till the night closes in!"

CORRECTIONS
In our last issue (April 2007, GI #168), we neglected to give proper credit to the artists responsible for our Game Informer cover, Big Time Attic. You can see their other work online at www.bigtimeattic.com. We apologize for the oversight.

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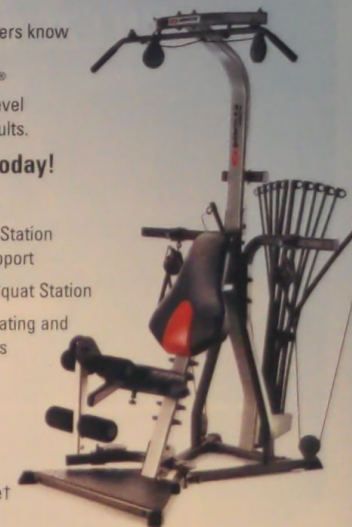
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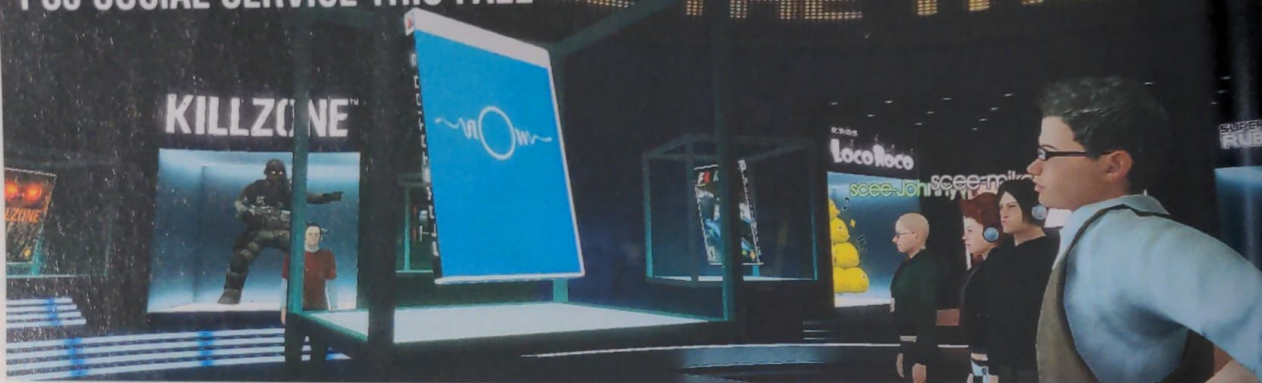


CONNECT

Breaking News, Views, And Technology From
The Cutting Edge Of Gaming

news

SONY COMES HOME PS3 SOCIAL SERVICE THIS FALL



Favorite trophies can be displayed in a personal Hall of Fame. Others will be stashed in a below ground storage unit

During this year's Game Developers Conference, Sony rallied around its latest vision for the future of gaming. In a keynote address delivered by president of worldwide studios Phil Harrison, the company claimed that video games went through two previous iterations, essentially offline and online. Sony is now trying to take things to the next step with what it is calling Game 3.0, or "The connected device with dynamic content and active connected communities [and] open standards."

The centerpiece of this new philosophy will be a free 3D social networking space called Home. The system will be accessed via a new icon in the cross media bar that connects directly to the Web. Users will first appear in the Central Lounge with a generic character that they can fully customize. In addition to various body and face sliders, players will be able to select from a variety of default clothes, purchased outfits, or duds that come included on game discs (SingsStar and Heavenly Sword shirts were shown as examples).

Players can communicate via text and voice, as well

as with selectable phrases and gestures. In the Games Space they'll be able to play a round of pool, bowling, or an arcade game without any separate menu system. To escape the hubbub, users will customize their own private apartments, which they can invite friends over to. These spaces can be decorated with a variety of couches, tables, decorations, wallpapers, etc. Again, these items will be a mix of free, paid, and packed in with games. Blank picture frames can be placed on the wall and filled with photos stored on the PS3 hard drive. Users will also be able to play video files on TVs placed in the space. Sony even plans to allow pet creation and customization in future iterations of Home.

The theater space is basically a digital representation of your local AMC. Users can meet up to watch new trailers and videos, and we can see events and premieres kicking off here as Home picks up steam. Perhaps the biggest potential lies in custom spaces created by gaming companies or brands like Coke, Gap, and NBC. These locations are fully malleable to replicate the inside of a business, show off a new gameplay feature, or pull off whatever companies

want to do to bring visitors in.

In response to Microsoft's Achievements, Sony has created a trophy system. Every Home user will have their own personal Hall of Fame that they can stock with around a dozen of their crowning accomplishments. Remaining trophies can still be stored and scrolled through in a kind of floating database. Right next to the main Hall of Fame area is massive auditorium that looks a lot like the imperial senate room from the Star Wars prequels. Here every PS3 game available will be displayed so that players can check out the possible trophies they can earn.

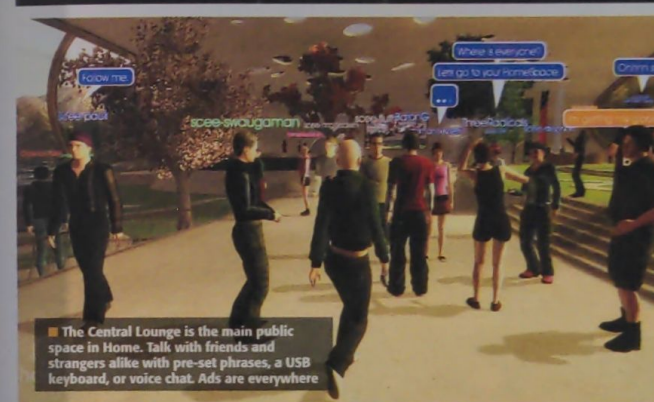
Even though the program is totally free, users will have to deal with a barrage of dynamic advertising in posters, banners, and video screens located around the spaces. As there's the additional cost of microtransactions for in-Home items. But it seems like users can invest as little or as many real dollars as they please and still enjoy a large majority of the features. Sony plans a large-scale beta of Home this April, followed by the official release in the fall.



Private apartments can be tricked out with physics-enabled objects, themed wallpaper, and framed digital photos from the PS3 hard drive



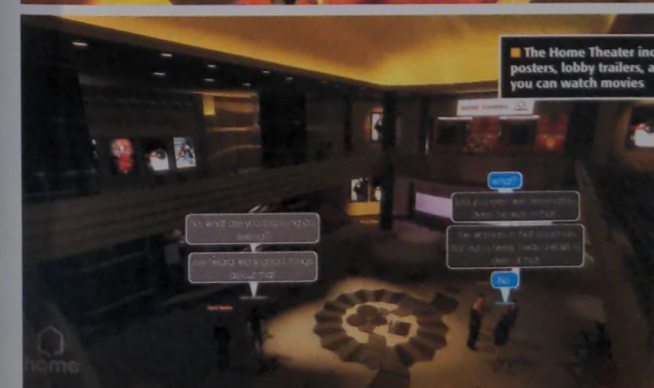
Game and non-game companies can create custom spaces for users to hang out in. This example area features an interactive driving range, basketball shootout, soccer booth, and boxing ring



The Central Lounge is the main public space in Home. Talk with friends and strangers alike with pre-set phrases, a USB keyboard, or voice chat. Ads are everywhere



The Games Space allows users to play pickup games like pool and bowling. Downloadable games can be played in stand-up arcade cabinets



The Home Theater includes constantly updating posters, lobby trailers, and physical spaces where you can watch movies



A virtual PSP will handle all in-game menu tasks like altering your living space and appearance and moving through different zones



Character customization is sufficiently deep, enough so that players should be able to create a reasonable facsimile of themselves



Eventually, players will be able to upgrade to more luxurious digs, complete with lakeside patio



DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

VIVA PIÑATA FULL OF MORE TREATS

Rare has admitted that the sales of Xbox 360's Viva Piñata haven't been huge, but promised that more titles in the franchise are on the way. Lee Schreiner, head of production at Rare, told GameIndustry.biz it expects to support the series for at least "two or three years."



CAPCOM COUNTING ON EPIC

Add Capcom to the long list of Unreal Engine 3 admirers. The company has signed on to use Epic's powerful engine for an upcoming U.S.-developed project to be named.

RPG FOR THE WII

Several Nintendo systems have struggled to obtain high-quality RPGs, but Koei has just announced its upcoming RPG Osamu, which ships this summer. —Jason H. White



SPECTOR RISES AGAIN

Ex-Non-Store Audien and Dico Ex mastermind Warren Spector is returning to gaming. At GDC, he mentioned that Junction Point Studios, his new company, has two projects up and running. One is being worked on with a Hollywood luminary, while the other is a collaboration with his wife, fantasy author Caroline Spector.



DS WEB BROWSER COMING

Only Nintendo's Opera Software has announced that its Nintendo DS web browser will be coming June 4th, and will allow users to surf the web in a couple of visual configurations to accommodate the DS's dual screens.



WII KEYBOARD?

Nintendo's development team says that it is considering adding a keyboard peripheral to the system in order to make online surfing easier, but it has not officially announced anything at this time.

games

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

SPRING HASN'T SPRUNG FOR SOME GAMES

With the recent announcements that BioShock is being pushed back into late August and developer The Collective is being taken off Warner Bros. Interactive's Dirty Harry game, we thought we'd update you really quick on some titles that should have been out now or may have just fallen off your radar.



Battlefield: Bad Company (PS3/Xbox 360)

We brought you the first look of the console-only version of the Battlefield franchise last fall. EA and developer DICE hoped we'd all be playing it now, but it's been moved to an unspecified date in 2008.



Medal of Honor Airborne (PS3/Xbox 360/PC)

Originally a holiday 2006 title, EA pushed this game into spring of this year, but it's still not out. An EA representative told us more info on Airborne would be coming shortly.



Too Human (Xbox 360)

Silicon Knights isn't known for making release dates, so it's no surprise that even Microsoft representatives don't have a clue when it's going to be out.



Enemy Territories: Quake Wars (PS3/Xbox 360/PC)

Quake Wars was very playable when it was unveiled at the last E3 and Activision said it'd be out before the end of 2006, but the company is now taking an "expect it when you see it" approach. No word if a simultaneous release is planned.

The Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass (DS)

Nintendo said this gem would be in our hands in 2006 when it was first announced, but our eyes must have been bigger than our brains. The company has just put a "Holiday 2007" sticker on the title.



Gran Turismo 4 Mobile (PSP)

After debuting in 2004, little has been heard about this Sony title. A 2006 release date came and went without a game, and a source at Polyphony told us the title was essentially on the back burner.

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"I want barrels of it." It's a late Wednesday afternoon at Greenberg Studios in downtown San Francisco, and 19-year-old gamer Raul* has just unequivocally described his attitude towards blood in a first-person shooter. Sitting before a moderator and among a group of his video gaming peers, Raul hasn't been the most vocal member of this post-release focus group for Ubisoft's Wii title *Red Steel*, but he is articulate in his opinions. This is exactly what the people behind the proverbial one-way glass wanted. In the end, it's just one comment of many that the research team will field about the game from forums, reviews, and sessions like this one. In that regard, this focus group is very similar to many others that occur for different companies throughout the industry. It's neither the beginning nor the end of the game development process, but simply one part along the way.

*The names of the participants in the focus group have been changed for legal reasons

BEHIND THE GLASS: GI LOOKS IN ON FOCUS GROUPS



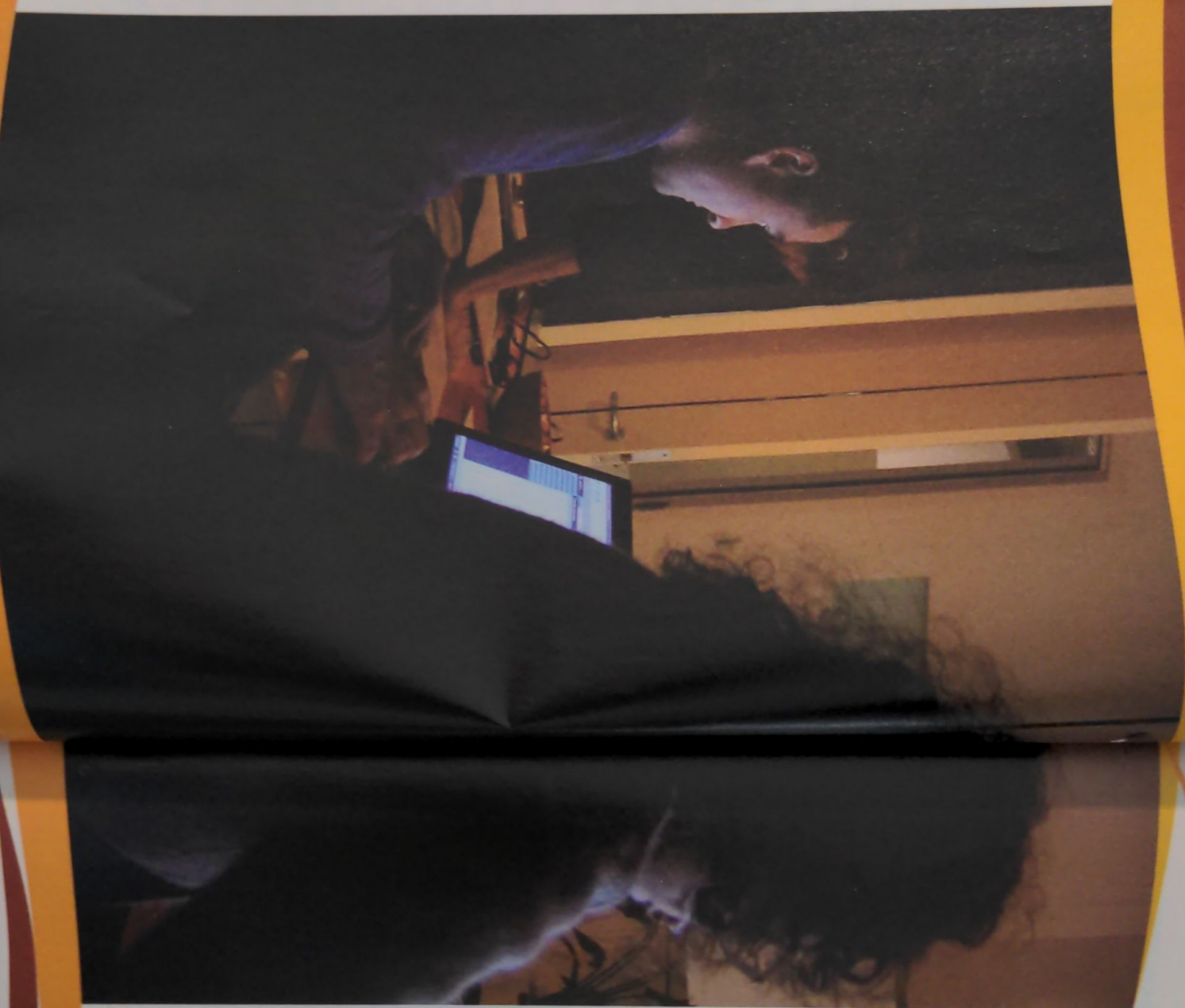
You're never quite

sure if you just happened to get a weird bunch of Splinter Cell fans that nobody agrees with in the Splinter Cell community. So you do have to be careful about using focus groups to make 'either/or' decisions.

— Nicki Shover,

Ubisoft director of

consumer knowledge



WEIRD SCIENCE

It's easy to hear companies misusing focus groups in order to develop games by marketing and demographic fact, but in our time watching a focus group in action and in our conversations with research experts in the industry, their power is consciously kept in context. "The point of consumer research isn't to say, 'This is what you should do,'" explains LucasArts director of consumer insights Sean Denny. "Because consumers are great, but they aren't game designers." Denny says that LucasArts often uses focus groups to get a read on specific gameplay mechanics, character design, environments, etc. These one-on-one sessions can start a year out from launch and involve

hands-on time with the game or perhaps the showing of a demo video for those times when a playable build isn't yet ready.

Any focus group hinges on the people you recruit for it. "If you don't get the right people, you're wasting your money," says Denny. This much is made clear as we talked to the Red Steel session moderator, Gary Rudman, president of CTR Consulting. Today he's going to oversee two back-to-back sessions. The first, which we sat in on, was comprised of people who hadn't played the game until

Ubisoft sent them copies with the instructions that they play it for at least six hours. The second contained those

that bought the game on their own.

Not only are potential focus group participants filtered to make sure they meet desired criteria (whether that be casual vs. hardcore gamer, age, gaming history, etc.), but Rudman says that there is an additional vetting process just before the group starts. He likes to ask these potential panel members about something that's currently pissing them off. "If they can't communicate one of those things, or their answer is a downward glance with a shrug, or is so obvious that they keep interrupting, then those are the people I might not take into the session," Rudman says. He always over-recruits. Today he expects to meet with up nine kids before finding six that are suitable. The others will be paid for their time and dismissed.

Then again, this pre-screening process doesn't always weed out the weirdos. One Ubisoft research member told us a story about a time when a guy in a Tom Clancy focus group started talking out that he was seeing ghosts. It turned out that some of the faces of the Ubisoft employees behind the one-way mirror were being illuminated by the blue glow of their LCD laptops and were faintly visible on the other side. Not fazed by this guy claiming he was seeing ghosts, the moderator of the session told him cheerfully, "Yes, you're right. We're here to talk about *Call of Duty*."

The moderator is an important part of the process. Publishers go outside to third parties at office premises in order to maintain some objectivity for Denny. He says you can never underestimate the power of the force. "You bring a Star Wars fan to our office, and it might be a little biased or skewed. They see the statue of Yoda when they walk in and that's pretty much it. If they know that George Lucas was behind the screen, they might not say, 'That's too good. I'd rather hear the bad news than not.'"



■ The use of the sword—or lack thereof—in the Red Steel focus group was an important point

In Ubisoft's case, they've had Rudman sub-contract a focus group facility on his own, and even have the facility recruit the people for the groups according to the specs that Ubisoft has outlined. Nicki Shover, Ubisoft's director of consumer knowledge, says these kinds of small details are important. "Even for us to do the interesting things for fans to happen."

Publishers may pay for the services of moderators like Rudman (who will also write up a final report regarding the focus group sessions for Ubisoft), but he is far from a company stooge. He always tells those chosen for the groups he has nothing to do with the stuff they see today. "The important thing I'm going to explain to them is that I'm looking for them to be brutally honest," he says. As the session starts, it's clear that Rudman and the research staff at Ubisoft have called the right people to deliver the honesty they are looking for. The five gamers that have been chosen represent a mix of gamers at different ages, and as a group, their conversations throughout the afternoon make the session feel more like a bunch of friends talking about gaming and not as if they are participating in a study.

One of the first topics of conversation Rudman brings up is the Wii itself. The console holds an interesting significance in the proceedings. Due to the way you play games on the Wii, the panel's opinions of Red Steel are clearly tied to what they think of the system itself. Angela, a 25-year-old married husband fan thinks that "anything that gets us closer to the Star Trek *holodeck* is cool," while the aforementioned Brad doesn't want to move around like a 5-year-old. Seven-year-old Daniel wants a serious thought. "I actually have to move my butt ass to play."

These opinions of the Wii appear to color Red Steel, but Shover and her associates aren't sure how relevant they are. They point out that since so few people actually have the system, it's not only likely that these are hardcore early adopters, but perhaps not even hardcore enough to make the demographics of the Wii's

“Analyzing consumer research isn't just about parroting back what the consumer said. It's about the context of why they said it.”

— Sean Denny,

LucasArts director of consumer insights



owners at this early stage in the platform's life. Rudman points out that trying to find the right Wii owners to fill two groups — on a Wednesday night even, adds Shovar — is like looking for a needle in a haystack. At the same time, it's currently no longer the system's launch period, and the expectations of the gamers like those in the group may have already grown. In her estimation, Shovar believes that a good mix of gamers can't be found for any title that sells less than a million copies.

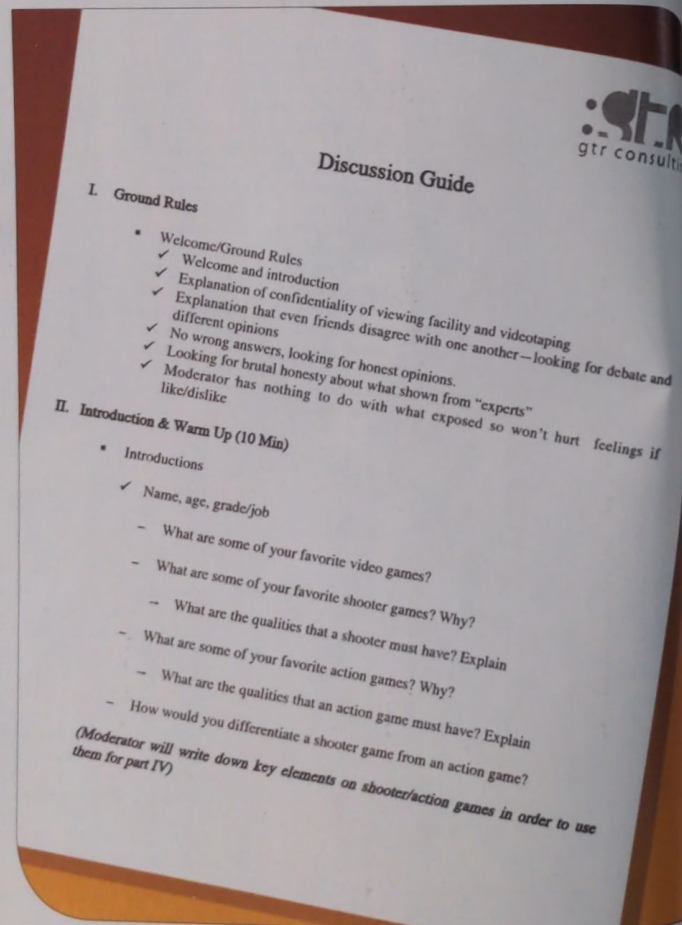
As the panel starts discussing Red Steel itself and the opinions are flying fast, it's clear that Rudman is crucial to the proceedings. Sometimes he pushes for clarification of a point, other times he makes sure the outspoken members of the group don't drown the others out. Shovar says that there's always one person who portrays him or herself as an expert (people may even defer to those with a high-falutin' British accent!), and this time's not an exception. Mark, at 19, fits this bill. Very specific in his observations, at times Mark would threaten to take over the conversation, but his affability made him non-threatening. Once he even mugged for us behind the mirror, fixing his hair with a comic touch while he knew we were watching.

A possible danger in focus groups, particularly with strong characters like Mark, is "groupthink." During the course of the session, several times Rudman had the panel write down their one-word impressions of a topic before it was discussed. This helped solidify each person's opinion before it could possibly be influenced by the discussion of someone else's ideas. For this panel, groupthink doesn't seem to be a problem, even for Darrell and Angela, who weren't as loud as Mark or 26-year-old techie Andy, but whose opinions were respected among their peers nonetheless.

Rudman starts asking them specific questions about Red Steel. What did they think of the setting? Did they use the spare enemy or stop time feature? Does it have the qualities that a shooter should have? No punches

are pulled in the ensuing answers, but what's more interesting is when the gamers express something deeper about their time with the game. Angela liked the seemingly mundane task of shooting barrels because "It's the one thing I have control over that they are not making me do." On the other hand, almost everyone in the panel wished there was more blood — not just for gore's sake but because they felt it was a touch of realism that the genre demanded. Someone even points out how there's dripping blood on the game's cover.

Although the group discusses the game's controls, this aspect of a title is usually handled differently in pre-release focus groups. Sean Denny says LucasArts videotapes these one-on-one sessions in order to provide an extra dimension of feedback. "We watch their hands on the controller, and we can see their facial expressions, and we actually have them verbalize and talk out loud — which is a little weird at first. It's that sort of ongoing verbal dialogue we ask people for so we can understand their thought



■ This eight-page document was the backbone of the focus group session, although it was not slavishly followed. At times moderator Gary Rudman strayed from the document as he saw fit



■ Focus groups testing out gameplay concepts are usually one-on-one sessions video-taped for additional feedback

process of, "You know, I want to use the Force, but the control scheme is such that I don't know how to use the Force! We need that level of detail so the team can go back and balance to make it as accessible as possible."

At various times in the Red Steel focus group, the knives come out and the feedback gets negative. Ugly, even. But finding a bunch of gamers to say something bad about a game isn't hard. What's more valuable is the panel's concrete ideas of what would have made the game better. You should be able to use your sword at all times, not just when the game lets you. "Why?" Rudman asks. "Well, you know," answers Andy. "Why are lightsabers still popular, man?" Raul says it would make him "excited," while Darrell expands, "It's like you're the freakin' Highlander or something." A better story, more environmental interactivity, improved controls, and of course, more blood are all targeted as some necessary improvements.

As the session ends, we're particularly interested to find out what the researchers thought about some of the more negative comments in the session. They were totally unfazed. In fact, during the focus group the team behind the mirror would often laugh out loud at a comment. Rudman is used to this. "Once you go down a negative path, it's pretty hard to go back because people are paid to come in here and be critical. We always say, 'When you come out of a focus group session, and you feel like your product doesn't suck, you've done very well, because [this age group] is very critical.'"

In many ways, this has been a typical focus group in that it's just data that can be interpreted and used in a variety of ways. There

are even contradictory statements those in the group have made which have to be reconciled. "You don't want polling," says Shovar. "You never want to be counting people in a focus group. Well, three of the guys didn't like it and three did." You are only seeing one group. In order to analyze this, and I hesitate to even use that word because you don't do that in qualitative [study], you wait until



■ More meaningful environmental interactivity is one thing that all the members of our focus group asked for

you've finished everything and see what are the patterns. What are the things, that after we see it, are: "These are things that we can act on." You're never quite sure if you just happened to get a weird bunch of Splinter Cell fans that nobody agrees with in the Splinter Cell community. So you do have to be careful about using focus groups to make "either/or" decisions." Shovar tells us that any info taken from this session will be augmented by the company's play-test lab in Montreal, comments taken from forums, and a wealth of other data as the future of the franchise is contemplated.

As we prepare to leave the facility, the Ubisoft team is getting ready for the next session. A buffet of Thai food has been set up and people help themselves as Rudman enters the room and begins to discuss changes to the question sheet the team has prepared in advance to tweak how this next panel is approached. There is talk about adding new questions to see how the focus group's recommendations for improvements would differ if Red Steel were approached as an action game and not a shooter, but some think this is unnecessary. We reach the lobby and see a dozen or so kids waiting to be vetted by Rudman for the next session, talking about video games as is natural. It's just another Wednesday night. ■ ■ ■

THE CUSTOMER IS NOT ALWAYS RIGHT

Sean Denny, LucasArts' director of consumer insights gave us an example of how you can't take what someone says in a focus group at face value. While doing some research for LEGO Star Wars II, the team fielded some feedback from some consumers who described what it would take for them to buy the game. However, the developers dismissed the advice. "It was valid, true analysis," says Denny. "So hey, if we wanted to make a game for 18 year-olds, that is what we'd do. But that is why we make [Star Wars] Battlefront, and they can play that game. So we decided to not use that data from consumers because it would go against the principle of the franchise."



the top 10 videogame weapons

If playing video games has taught us anything, it's that in the year 20XX robots from the future will most likely try to enslave mankind. To be prepared for this event, the GI office has been collecting and blueprinting the ultimate video game arsenal. These are the top ten weapons we want at our sides when the decisive hour is at hand. Viva La Resistance!

1 Zero-Point Energy Field Manipulator (Half-Life 2)

The thing that made the Gravity Gun so awesome was Valve's incredible physics. You could spend hours just playing with Dog and this gun, and for a game where the premise is about you shooting dudes, that says a lot about a gun. Then Valve made it even better: By the end of Half-life 2 the Gravity Gun is so super-powered that everything is a weapon, and this is the only gun you need.



2 BFG (Doom)

Ah, the "Bio Force Gun." Wait a minute, that's not what it stands for (stupid Doom movie)! Doom had a lot of weapons that changed the face of gaming, like the chainsaw and the double-barreled shotgun, but this big freakin' gun tops them all. As Samuel L. Jackson would say, "when you absolutely, positively have to kill every last [gentleman] in the room, accept no substitutes."



3 Metal Blades (Mega Man 2)

Metal Blades were so powerful and energy efficient that after you got them you literally stopped using the normal mega buster. What was the point? Several of the robot masters went down easily with the blades, and even Metal Man himself couldn't take more than one shot from his own weapon. We haven't seen a Mega Man weapon since that was this imbalanced and fun.



4 Lightsaber (Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast)

Sorry, fans of the Halo 2 Energy Sword, but the lightsaber was here first and it's still cooler. We fondly remember the first time we fired up the lightsaber in Jedi Knight II. Spending the opening levels without it only made tearing through those first waves of stormtroopers all the more enjoyable. Sure, we'd seen the lightsaber before in other games, but this was the first time we really felt like we were using it.



5 Sheepinator (Ratchet and Clank: Going Commando)

We'd also take the Morph-O-Ray or the Qwack-O-Ray. We picked the Sheepinator because it turns enemies into sheep, and sheep are stupid, making this weapon insulting as well as funny. As an added bonus, the Sheepinator gave us some hilarious commercials. The Concrete Donkey from Worms 3D and the Shark Gun from Armed and Dangerous get honorable mentions here for adding creative comedy to a killing tool.



6 Hyper Beam (Super Metroid)

During the final fight with Mother Brain, all of Samus' weapons are replaced with the Hyper Beam. Any reservations you might have had about losing all your firepower are quickly dispelled the second you unload the new weapon on Mother Brain and watch her reel back, howling in pain. Up until the Hyper Beam, we hadn't played a game that made us afraid of our own power.



7 Cerebral Bore (Turok 2: Seeds of Evil)

The Cerebral Bore attached itself to enemies' heads and drilled into their skulls. The resulting pop of blood and brain matter was a truly gratifying experience. You may have cursed Turok 2 during that long trek to find the next save station, but when you got your hands on the Cerebral Bore, the time began to fly.



8 Blades of Chaos (God of War)

Kratos' blades are what distinguish him from other action heroes. They give him range and add a distinct visual style to his combat. Imagine if Kratos had just used a sword like Dante. Actually, you did get the option to use a sword later in the game, but you might not remember it, because you probably didn't use it. The reasons for that are the Blades of Chaos.



9 Spread Gun (Contra)

Like some kind of insanely wide shotgun, the Spread gun was a Contra player's greatest asset, capable of turning even a mediocre player into a one-man army. It didn't matter if you were playing with your best friend, when you saw that friendly flying S float across the screen, it was every man for himself to get it first.



10 Laptop Gun (Perfect Dark)

Sure, there were more powerful weapons in the game, but there was nothing more satisfying than setting up a transforming turret next to the body armor and waiting for a buddy to walk into it. With the ability to function as a machine gun or a bullet-spewing trap, the laptop gun is a little more diverse, so it just barely edges out the proximity mines from GoldenEye.



LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER ANNIVERSARY

WWW.TOMBRAIDER.COM

LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip



NINTENDO NIXES ONLINE FOR 07

Recently the president of SNK revealed that Nintendo is restricting companies from adding online functionality to their Wii games – whether on the Virtual Console or regular retail titles – until after 2007. Nintendo itself has only one online title announced, and that is Pokémon Battle Revolution.



FF XIII NOT PS3 EXCLUSIVE?

Talking to a French newspaper, Sony France president Georges Fomay hinted that the PS3 exclusivity of Final Fantasy XIII may be in danger. "As far as Final Fantasy XIII goes, I can tell you that the exclusivity is in discussion." Also worth mentioning is that Square Enix just filed for a trademark for something called "Final Fantasy Haeresis XIII."



MICROSOFT IN MOTION

Which one of these is not like the other? With motion sensing being used by both Nintendo and Sony, Microsoft's Xbox 360 hasn't jumped on the bandwagon. However, rumors have been circulating that the company is developing its own answer to the motion sensing movement. Whether this sees the light of day or is just a test run remains to be seen.



NEW KATAMARI?

A rumor has sprung up that Namco has a PS3, Xbox 360, and Wii title called Beautiful Katamari in the works, as well as a console version of Warhammer: Mark of Chaos. Both will supposedly come out this fall.

Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gamemag.com and we'll be all ears.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

You probably won't guess this game, but it's hilarious anyway. Coming out for the ZX Spectrum by Sinclair in the U.K. (perhaps you've seen British developers talk up this system and wondered what they were going on about) in 1985, this compilation of games was self-evidently bad. It contained five of the worst titles submitted to publisher/developer Firebird: Fido, Fido2, Puppy Power, Race Ace, Fruit Machine, and Weasel Willy. Despite its own advertising telling consumers it wasn't worth it, this game cassette sold – likely because it was only £2.50.



(Answer on page 32)

news

PS3 RUMBLES ON
SONY/IMMERSION KISS & MAKE UP

After a few rounds of boxing between their lawyers, Sony and Immersion Corporation have resolved their patent dispute and formed a new agreement to deliver Immersion's rumble technology in "PlayStation format products." The deal doesn't specifically mention the PS3, but that feature is conspicuously absent from the new system's controllers. As part of the deal, Sony will pay Immersion \$22.5 million over three years – not including the \$97.2 million owed due to the original patent lawsuit.



news

VISTA GOES LIVE
CROSS-PLATFORM PLAY IN JUNE

Microsoft has announced details regarding Games for Windows Live – Vista PC's version of Xbox 360's Xbox Live – that will launch on May 8th alongside the PC version of Halo 2. Games for Windows Live enables cross-platform play with the 360, as well as chat between the two systems and a unified Gamerscore and Achievement list. Cross-platform play will not be available until June when Shadowrun (shown) comes out.

Like Xbox Live, Windows Live will come in two different forms – Silver and Gold. Silver is free and gives you online play and unifies your Gamerscore, Gamertag, and profile, and also includes a friends list, chat, and single-player Achievements. Gold costs \$49.95 a year (\$7.99 a month or \$19.99 for three) unless you already have a Gold membership on Xbox Live, which you can use. It encompasses the features of Silver while adding cross-platform multiplayer play, TrueSkill matchmaking, and multiplayer Achievements. Regular multiplayer does not require a membership.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

QUOTE

I'VE HAD DINNER WITH [MR. KUTARAGI] MORE TIMES THAN I'VE HAD DINNER WITH MY WIFE, AND THAT'S NOT REALLY HEALTHY.

– Sony CEO Howard Stringer on how he's tried to improve his strained relationship with Ken Kutaragi



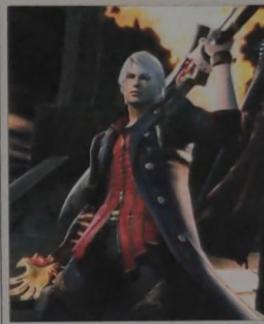
GOOD

At GDC, Electronic Arts announced its new project with Guitar Hero developer Harmonix. The pair have agreed to a deal where EA will publish the MTV-branded title. The game is believed to incorporate similar principles as the Guitar Hero franchise, except encompassing a full band.



BAD?

New Line Cinema has gained the rights to make a movie out of Epic's Gears of War title. Lead designer Cliff Bleszinski will act as the film's executive producer, and Stuart Beattie (Collateral) will write the picture. Here's hoping he can come up with something better than "You can't stop the train!"



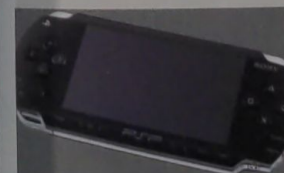
GOOD

As part of its new multiplatform approach, Capcom has confirmed that Devil May Cry 4 is coming to the Xbox 360 and PC – not just the PS3. Don't worry, Sony fans. Afrika is still PS3 exclusive!



BAD

LucasArts' Star Wars: The Force Unleashed is not ready to be a Jedi yet. The game has been delayed; bumped from its late '07 release into sometime in 2008.



GOOD

For the first time UK Sony executive Ray Maquire has confirmed the widely believed plan to release a redesigned PSP. Maquire characterized the new PSP as smaller and lighter, but said the handheld's screen size would remain the same. No word on whether the system would come down in price, although Sony has coincided a price-drop with a redesign in the past.

GOOD

The size limit for Xbox Live Arcade games has been raised from 50MB to 150MB. In conjunction with this increase, a new 512MB memory unit is on sale for \$49.99 for Core System owners without a hard drive. The existing 64MB unit will drop down to \$29.99.

■ Konami's Castlevania: Symphony of the Night started the trend of larger Xbox Live Arcade games

LARA CROFT
TOMB
RAIDER
ANNIVERSARY

WWW.TOMBRAIDER.COM

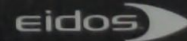


Mild Suggestive Themes
Violence



Available for the PlayStation®2
computer entertainment
system and PSP®
(PlayStation®Portable) system

Games
for Windows



Life After Warcraft

what's Your Next MMO?

Maybe your guild is banging on the doors of Illidan's Black Temple but you're growing tired of the raiding treadmill. Perhaps end-game dungeons require more effort to clear than you're willing to put in, or the latest round of clearly unnecessary nerfs to your class crossed the line. Maybe you're just sick of World of Warcraft in general. So what's next?

Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > DEVELOPER EA MYTHIC
> RELEASE WINTER

The clashes in Warhammer occur on several levels. You'll fight over objectives in the public world, compete in instanced battlefields with balanced teams, and even mount large-scale invasions of enemy territory with the eventual goal of conquering your foes' capitol city. The way that public zones are structured, with the PvP objectives located away from the more PvE-oriented content, should hopefully keep the grieving under control. EA Mythic is also talking about allowing players to level solely through PvP conflict, eliminating the need to grind dumb scripted AI mobs to get to the good stuff.



Compete

Action

TABULA RASA

Lord British's new project for Korean publisher NCsoft is truly unique. An action-oriented combat model that lets players physically dodge incoming projectiles and a heavily instancing-based design make Tabula Rasa a great one to watch if you're interested in something new and different.



HUXLEY

Available in July for PC as well as September on 360, Huxley is attempting to combine the persistent world of an MMO with the team-based shooting action of Counter-Strike. We'll know whether Korean developer/publisher Webzen pulls it off any better than Planetside soon enough.



FURY

New publisher Gamecock is taking MMOs in a new direction: deathmatch-style arena combat. Fury gives players a classless progression system to customize their characters as they see fit, and aims to kick the pants off of WoW's arena and battlegrounds systems by making PvP the focus of the game.



GODS & HEROES: ROME RISING

Greco-Roman mythology is the perfect setting for this action-based MMO from Perpetual Entertainment and SOE. Recruiting and training a squad of soldiers to fight with you against creatures strange and magical is a major selling point here, and promises to make soloing very viable play style despite the online nature of the game.



Build



XBOX 360 | PC

Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

PUBLISHER EIDOS INTERACTIVE/FUNCOM > DEVELOPER FUNCOM
> RELEASE SUMMER (PC), TBA (360)

Out on the frontier you can build up towns that have the most skilled blacksmiths, the richest merchants, and the strongest guards – all of whom owe allegiance to the heroes that made it all possible (that's you). NPC enemies will build up their own towns and send out raiding parties, so you have to protect them as well. If you're wondering why you would care about any of this, Age of Conan also features siege and formation warfare: large-scale conflicts where the wealth and power to get others to fight for you can be worth more than individual skill in battle. Furthermore, you can build towns in the Border Kingdoms that are centers for PvP action, and give out guild-wide buffs to those who can conquer and hold the most territory.

Explore



PC

The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar

PUBLISHER MIDWAY > DEVELOPER TURBINE > RELEASE APRIL 24

We've all gotten a giggle out of passing over a zone line in WoW and dinging a level off of the exploration XP. What if you got a title and access to a brand new talent for doing that as well? The Lord of the Rings Online has a feature that rewards players for accomplishing "Deeds" that does just that. Of course, you'll unlock these achievements via a variety of derring-do, be it the aforementioned exploration, committing genocidal atrocities against the monsters in a certain region, or completing a difficult instanced dungeon. This is the most direct assault on WoW's core gameplay that we've seen. We'll find out very soon whether Turbine can keep Blizzard on its toes when LOTRO releases at the end of April.

These games have been announced as works in progress, but no further details have been made available. Still, the subject matter is intriguing enough to warrant a mention.

WARHAMMER 40,000

THQ recently announced that it is working with developer Vigil on an MMO based on the Games Workshop license. The idea of being able to replay an Inquisitor is delicious.



MARVEL UNIVERSE ONLINE

Microsoft is publishing this next project from City of Heroes developer Cryptic Studios. Prepare for the heroic adventures of Wolverine and Magneto. Rook when ever this launches.



DC COMICS MMO

Sony Online Entertainment's foray into comic-based gaming comes with the artistic stylings of Jim Lee rendered by Unreal Engine 3.



STAR TREK ONLINE

Perpetual Entertainment is working on the iconic license, but no publisher is announced yet. Residents will surely need to be nerfed; nobody will want to form an away team without at least one!



Incognito

TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER

JOEL MANNERS
Game Director,
Propaganda Games
(Turok)



- 1 Starcraft - PC
- 2 X-COM: UFO Defense - PC
- 3 Wing Commander: Privateer - PC
- 4 Half-Life 2 - PC
- 5 Ultima VII - PC

READER

KA'NOVA
WILLIAMS
Pontiac, Michigan



- 1 Final Fantasy VII - PSone
- 2 The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion - Xbox 360
- 3 ESPN NFL 2K Series - PS2/Xbox
- 4 Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria - PS2
- 5 Xenogears - PSone

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:
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724 N 1st St 4th Fl
Minneapolis, MN 55401-9022
email: topfive@gameinformer.com
(attach digital picture)

TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top Ten Facts About Kratos

- 10 Kratos actually made High Overlord Saurfang's life bar move
- 9 Kratos and Master Chief are not friends. As a corollary, he does not want to be your friend
- 8 Next-gen starts when Kratos says it starts
- 7 Kratos can bench press himself
- 6 When Kratos kills Ridley, he stays dead
- 5 Ceres Lannister would have been dead four books ago if Kratos bothered with reading
- 4 Kratos does not need 299 extra dudes to hold back the thousand nations of the Persian Empire
- 3 Kratos' Princess is not in another castle
- 2 Roundhouse kicks are like candy to Kratos
- 1 He murdered the freakin' god of war

Name That Game Answer: Don't Buy This

games

WHOLE LOTTA HALO 3

STEP UP TO LEGENDARY

Any Halo 3 news is good news, and Microsoft has just revealed the contents of its limited-quantity Halo 3 Legendary and Limited Edition package sets to go along with the standard \$59.99 version.



Legendary Edition (\$129.99)

- Miniature replica Spartan Helmet
- Bonus disc containing "Making of" documentary with several high-definition featurettes and a high-def audio-visual calibration tool
- Original Halo 3 storyboard art from Lee Wilson
- A second bonus disc exclusive to the Legendary Edition that looks back at the story of the first two Halo games as told through re-mastered cutscenes with commentary, a "Day in the Life at Bungie" featurette, and exclusive Red vs. Blue and This Spartan Life machinima content

Limited Edition (\$69.99)

- Metal collector's case
- First bonus disc from the Legendary Edition
- Halo fiction and art book featuring never-before-seen art and story, as well as info on the series' species and factions



TALK TO YOUR FRIEND. SOMETHING WILL STICK.

ABOVETHEINFLUENCE.COM



CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

A New Realm

After finishing college at UCLA, Pitchford moves to Dallas to take a job with 3D Realms, where he works on the Duke Nukem 3D PlayStation Pak and Atari Edition.

Rebel Alliance

Pitchford moves on to startup developer Rebel Boat Rocket and begins work on a game for EA called *Play War*. Unfortunately, the game is never completed.

Getting in Gear

Pitchford, with a core group of developers, forms Gearbox Software, the company that is his home to this day.

Using the Force

Gearbox gets its first big gig creating *Halo: Combat Evolved* for Xbox. The role of story at the studio is intense: it's a big job, paving the way for story inspiration to come, including Gearbox's own *Blue Shift*.

Gearbox branches out into the *Bond* universe, creating the PC version of *007: Nightfire* for Electronic Arts.

Secret Agents

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Master Moves

Already having worked with *Halo: Life*, Gearbox takes on the world's other great sci-fi shooter, porting Bungie's blockbuster *Halo* to the PC. The game is released to strong sales and critical acclaim.

Brotherly Love

Finally, working on its own IP, Gearbox releases *WWII* with its first excellent *Brothers in Arms* (rated M for 17+), a novel-based shooter based on actual events. The game is the culmination of all that Gearbox has been persisting with.

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Back to the Front

Gearbox delivers its second stellar *Brothers in Arms* like in a year, *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hell*, a well-received sequel that improves on the original in many respects. Like its predecessor, it was critical praise and strong sales.

RANDY PITCHFORD

CEO, GEARBOX SOFTWARE

>> Texas-based Gearbox Software has worked with some of the biggest franchises in the business. After the success of *Brothers in Arms*, the company is working on a game based on Ridley Scott's *Aliens*. We recently spoke with CEO Randy Pitchford about the company's present and future. <<

Talk about the next-generation *Brothers in Arms*.

Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway is the next game. Hopefully, it will come out this year, but we're going to ship something we're proud of. The *Brothers in Arms* games are about a particular squad, the 502nd parachute infantry regiment of the 101st Airborne. After Normandy, they go back to England and sleep it off and regroup. Their next assignment is an Allied plan in the fall of 1944 called Operation Market Garden. What they did is take every single paratrooper and they dropped them in Holland along this road that goes straight [between] France and Germany. The paratroopers were supposed to hold this corridor, and then they were going to race this armored division right through to Berlin and end the war by Christmas. Unfortunately, the Germans were there and there were a lot of them. Their response is to crush this corridor the Allies were trying to create.

In Normandy, this squad captured Carentan, the

Could you talk about it in broader terms? I'll give you a little bit. If you're anything like me, you've seen the first two movies many times.

And we've seen the other ones once.

Exactly. There's a reason for that. For us, the core fantasy is all about that time period. In my opinion, the fulfillment of that fantasy, to actually be a participant has not actually happened yet. I thought the *Aliens* vs. *Predator* games were fun, but there has not been anything that's really let me feel like I'm there with those guys, living the life of a colonial marine.

Aliens has a great ambiance for a shooter and has a great mythology, but it also seems to lend itself to a very tight, old-school corridor-based experience. Recently, shooters have really been opening things up beyond that design template. How do you deal with that? I think it's a fantasy to be in the squad, to be in

How do you balance these big projects being an independent developer?

We've always had multiple teams. We have what I call "preproduction units" — guys like the director, producer, art director, lead designer, and lead engineer. You get that five-man team in there and they can do a lot. You can develop that concept with the five-man team and know if you've got something that's worth investing in. You don't have to build a game and spend 10 million bucks before you realize there's something that's worth investing in.

You're using Unreal Engine 3 for *Brothers in Arms* and *Aliens*. You've worked with a lot of engines before, how do you rate Unreal 3?

We're probably the only developer on the planet that's worked directly with the *Halo* engine, with *Halo: Life* and *Source*, and *Unreal Engine 3*. A lot of people like to beat Epic up right now because they're winning, but I love it. *Unreal Engine 3* is a huge value. It would cost me so much more to build

I've worked on a few science fiction shooters...we're all just stealing from *Aliens*.

junction point of the invasion beaches where the Allied forces could regroup. Carentan was kind of like the Death Star, if you relate it to *Star Wars*. It was a big victory. Well, Market Garden is like *The Empire Strikes Back* — it's not a good day for the Allies. It's really kind of a dark situation, and it's difficult for Baker, the guy that's the hero in the *Brothers in Arms* story. These guys are in a strategic loss, but they've got to find some sort of moral victory.

The other big project you have going on is the *Aliens* game. What's your vision for the project?

I've worked on a few science-fiction shooters — I did the PC version of *Halo*. I worked on *Duke Nukem*. We're all just stealing from *Aliens*. The drop ship in *Halo*, the walls of any alien scene in *Duke*, the face-huggers — this whole industry is stealing from *Aliens*. I'm as guilty as anyone. We made a lot of interesting IP that would be cool to work with and *Aliens* was at the top of the list. Then, we had this meeting with Sega, and they asked, "You wouldn't be interested in the *Aliens* franchise, would you?" I said, "You've got to be kidding me." Eventually, the deal got put together. There's been a brief announcement that we're doing it. [But] I'm going to disappoint you because I'm not going to reveal much.

one of those corridors in the movie. But, if we limited ourselves to that, I think we'd be doing a disservice to the brand and to how far this fantasy can be taken. In the second movie, there were some key, fundamental questions that were behind the plot and those questions have never really been answered.

So you'll be branching off into some additional story content?

We're pretty ambitious with this one. There are a lot of people involved, a lot of the people that helped create *Aliens*. Two people on the project had a meeting with Ridley Scott and he broke out his book of sketches for the original storyboards for *Aliens*. I was really mad that I wasn't at this meeting! It sounded like one of those life experience things — Ridley breaks out this book, blows the dust off it, and starts explaining what he was thinking about when he was dreaming this stuff up. Even going into backstory details in his mind and answers to questions that any fan of the series has had, but no one knows the answers except the creator. I'm a bit jealous that I'm not down in the trenches on *Aliens*. But the guys that are — they're amazing. They're better than me.

that kind of technology on my own. Sure, we could do it, and a lot of people can and they want to prove they can. I don't care; I want to make games, don't want to make tech.

Anything more you'd like to let us know about?

Sure. We started out [making] PC games and console games. But I love handheld games. I've got a DS and a PSP and I play the s— out of them. We said, "How can we learn about these platforms?" So, we worked with the Shanghai Ubisoft studio and they did a good job bringing *Brothers in Arms* to the PSP. That taught us something about the PSP. Also, DS is really interesting, and we want to think about what our brand means on the DS. But beyond that, we think that handhelds are really cool places to invent new things that have never been done before. I can take a huge risk and do something crazy on a handheld and — at the end of the day — it only cost me one or two million bucks. So, we started getting into handheld stuff now, and that's really cool. I want to see more original stuff on the PSP and I'd like to contribute to that. I also think there are certain types of games that are underrepresented on the DS. Pretty soon we're going to be announcing some new stuff.

Photo: Dan Heltzer



READY TO MAKE HISTORY

Randy Pitchford has helped build Gearbox into one of the industry's most respected independent developers.

PC SHOWDOWN!

GI REFEREES THE BATTLE OF THE BIG RIGS

We're starting to round up the best in monster gaming PC hardware, and this is the first litter we could get our grubby little hands on. We even ran these puppies through PC and 3D Mark software. Maybe you can choose between these two beauties, because we hate having to make decisions of the heart.

pc

ALIENWARE AREA-51 7500

COST *****

Alienware's gaming rig can be configured for nearly a third the price of the Omen, but for each dollar you shave you're cutting out performance. Ours cost \$4,988 and scored a little lower than the Omen on the 3DMark05 and PCMark05 benchmarks (11709 and 8940 respectively). Like the Voodoo, the Area-51's video cards are DirectX 10 compliant, so you can play upcoming games like Crysis in all their glory. Though it scored lower, the Alienware wins out due to its superior design. Unlike the loud Voodoo, this liquid-cooled monster kept quiet under its Alien-themed cocoon.

Starting at \$2,199.00 • www.alienware.com

VOODOO OMEN

COST *****

The Omen is built for speed and power. Its Quad Core processors reportedly provide 70 percent more processing power than Intel's dual core processors. This pricey beast can be configured with ATI Crossfire or nVidia SLI graphics cards. Our Omen unit (with SLI) tested well in 3DMark05 and PCMark05, scoring 16174 in the former and 9965 in the latter. This monster's impressive performance is tempered by its obnoxiously loud liquid intercooler, which sounds like a gurgling Coca-Cola plant. The perforated case, while a spectacular view in the dark, doesn't help dampen the sound either. Does the future have to sound like a swamp cooler?

Starting at \$5,800.00 • www.voodooopc.com



peripherals

SPLIT FISH FRAG FX CONTROLLER

COST *****

Maybe now PC gamers will stop complaining and play Call of Duty on PS3. Okay, that probably won't happen, but the Frag FX does offer a mouse-friendly layout for FPS fans. The Frag FX is comfortable, smooth, and offers enough ways for players to adjust the sensitivity as long as you can find a stable place to rest the mouse pad. We didn't get to test the motion sensing, but we're sure there are plenty of people out there who will prefer this to a standard controller when playing Resistance.

\$59.99 (cabled PS3), \$69.99 (Bluetooth PS3) • www.splitfish.com



HORI FIGHTING STICK 3

COST *****

Aptly titled the Fighting Stick 3, this is an arcade stick for your PS3. Virtua Fighter fans, rejoice! You finally have a fighting stick worth using. The Fighting Stick 3 has a three-meter cord and three individual turbo settings for every button. This seems to be the stick to get, since Sega's arcade stick will cost you well over a hundred dollars to import.

\$49.99 • www.hori.jp/us/

dvd



THE LOST ROOM

Maybe you saw *The Lost Room* when the Sci-Fi Channel ran it as a miniseries. If so, you know why should own this. If you didn't, then here is your chance to check out this cool show. The production values aren't super high (this is a TV miniseries after all), but we love the premise about a key that unlocks any door into a mysterious motel room. Here's hoping we get a full-on series.

\$19.98 • www.lionsgate.com



FINAL FANTASY VII: ADVENT CHILDREN LIMITED EDITION COLLECTOR'S SET

Here's a set for the nerds. These are the same collector's discs that have been out for awhile, but now they come packed with 10 Final Fantasy postcards, the 100-page movie script, and a 72-page novel that may not be award winning, but provides information about events that didn't happen in the movie.

\$39.99 • www.sonypictures.com



etc.

SABERTOOTH GAMES UFS COLLECTIBLE CARD GAME

It can be hard to jump into the middle of CCGs and TCGs, but maybe you will make an exception for the Universal Fighting System as it features your favorite fighters from games like Soul Calibur, Street Fighter, King of Fighters, and Samurai Showdown. And the best part about the card using the same system is that you can now act out that Chun Li vs. Ivy fan fiction you have been writing for years.

\$9.99 (starter decks) \$3.49 (booster packs)
www.sabertoothgames.com



etc.

ELECTRIC-SPIN GOLF LAUNCHPAD

COST *****

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THE FUTURE OF THE MMOS



BY JACK EMMERT
CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER,
CRYPTIC STUDIOS

The future of massively multiplayer games is once again in the forefront of many discussions I've had at conferences. The success of World of Warcraft has forced the video game industry to re-analyze the MMORPG genre. At last the MMORPG market has the breakout, mass-market hit that it's always needed.

It was only a few years ago that the industry was eager for that game. EverQuest and Dark Age of Camelot had subscription bases of well over 200,000, but these games were still considered niche. Nevertheless, EQ and Dark Age were both exceedingly profitable and promised even more, if only the games could appeal beyond hardcore players.

At first, Sims Online seemed poised to grab the attention of hardcore and the more numerous casual gamers. Obviously, Sims was an enormously popular IP; every expansion sold millions of copies. But Sims Online didn't sell well. The next sure-fire hit was supposed to be Star Wars Galaxies. I'm not entirely sure that its sales numbers weren't well over a million, but the game didn't retain enough customers to top or even match EQ. Publishers canceled numerous other products (Mythica) or the games simply didn't appeal (Earth and Beyond). The industry discovered that replicating the success of an EQ was a daunting task, let alone tapping into the mass market.

Then came 2004. In April, the little known City of Heroes launched to much acclaim and phenomenal sales. After numerous MMORPG failures and disappointments, City of Heroes seemed to prove that another MMORPG game could, in fact, succeed. And if CoH opened the door to further possibilities in MMORPGs, then World of Warcraft came into the house and partied all night. No PC game has dominated the market like WoW. Ever. Suddenly, the MMORPG genre was center stage.

Many had assumed that the MMORPG had to break out of its stale game mechanics ("phat lewt",

"grinding") in order to appeal to the mass market. But WoW proved this assumption entirely wrong. While CoH eschewed some of the complicated game mechanics of other games, WoW embraced them. WoW wasn't so much an innovation as much an iteration. It was simply a more polished version of EQ's tried-and-true formulas.

WoW, however, did do one thing that no other game had. According to what I've heard and read, Blizzard spent between \$50 and \$70 million on development alone. Most MMORPGs had been developed on only a fraction of this. Because of Blizzard's history of success, they can draw upon an almost unlimited well of funds.

But almost no other developer is in this situation. And almost no publisher wants to spend \$50 to \$70 million on development. Unless one can positively deliver over a million subscribers — something that only WoW has managed to do — the publisher won't make back their money for quite some time.

So here's the impasse: customers are expecting MMORPGs to possess content and quality similar to WoW's, but publishers can't invest that kind of money. I was discussing a potential MMORPG with a publisher. They provided us with a budget. When I told them the game that we could deliver for that price, immediately the publisher compared it to WoW and found our content lacking. I explained that WoW cost much more and thus had more content. From their perspective, the game couldn't compete with WoW so the publisher declined to continue conversations.

Cost is the number one issue of MMORPG development. This is where we are going to see the MMORPG market begin to bifurcate along two lines.

First, people wanting WoW-level success are going to explore new financial models. Publishers and developers alike are going to borrow a lot of expertise from Hollywood in order to fund big projects. The typical publisher/developer relationship had been that the publisher would give their own money to the developer in order to make a game.

Cost is the number one issue of MMORPG development. This is where we are going to see the MMORPG market begin to bifurcate along two lines.

Now, even the publisher is concerned about such a huge monetary outlay. Other players will be invited to the table to bear the financial risk.

As part of this, I believe that a lot of publishers will start eschewing independent developers in favor of internal teams. Why pay a developer a royalty when you can keep 100 percent of the money yourself? Most publishers would prefer to hire people with previous MMORPG experience and rely upon that in order to make a game. Over the past five years, a pool of people who have been part of some reasonably successful MMORPGs has developed. This is a pool many publishers can draw from.

Second, a healthy niche market will slowly develop. These are MMORPGs that don't try to compete with WoW, but rather aim for more modest subscription numbers. These products will capitalize on either IP's with devoted fanbases (World of Darkness) or extremely focused genres (Pirates of the Burning Seas). Both types of products deliver a certain sales amount because of their specific appeal, but might not have the upside of a WoW. These sorts of games will be done mostly by independent developers backed by venture capitalists and private equity. Outside investors appreciate the regular income stream that a MMORPG with even as little as 100,000 subscribers can deliver.

These two developments will take several years to shake out. In the short term, I think we'll see a boom/bust cycle similar to that of five years ago. A number of people will leap into the fray because of WoW's success just as many did in response to EQ. Most, however, will fail to meet the lofty goals promised to investors and publishers. These games will either be canceled or drift along with minimal success. The eagerness for MMORPGs will subside and then stabilize. At least until Blizzard comes out with World of Starcraft... ■■■■

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NEW RELEASES

- The Darkness - PS3, 360
- Forza Motorsport 2 - 360
- GoPets - DS
- Marvel Trading Card Game - DS
- Sega Rally Evo - 360
- Tenchu Z - 360

wed

thur

fri 04

Tenchu Z - 05/01

Spider-Man 3 is everywhere today. It opens in theaters, and will be released on every video game machine known to man (maybe even Gimondo).

sat

08

NEW RELEASES

- Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars - 360
- Death Jr. & the Science Fair of Doom - DS
- Driver 76 - PSP
- Halo 2 - PC
- Infernal - PC
- Lair - PS3

09

COUNTDOWN BEGINS
It would appear that the reign of the weekly comic stories is upon us. Hot off the heels of DC's amazing 52 series, Countdown begins at issue 51 and counts down each week. All sources point toward Jimmy Olsen biting the big one in this first issue.

11

28 WEEKS LATER
28 Weeks Later slides into cineplexes today. Looks like Sandra Bullock couldn't stay off the sauce. She's back in rehab! Oh wait... This is a zombie movie! Sandra Bullock couldn't fight off zombies! What were they thinking?



15

NEW RELEASES

- Code Lyoko - DS
- Legend of the Dragon - PSP
- Resident Evil 4 - PC
- Saints Row - PS3
- Shrek the Third - 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS
- The Sims: Pet Stories - PC
- Touch the Dead - DS
- Two Worlds - 360, PC

16

WORLD WAR HULK STARTS
During Civil War, the Hulk was off conquering another planet. He also got his jiggly on with an alien and is expecting a child soon. Now that his interstellar vacation is done, the big green goliath is coming back to Earth with his new alien army in tow. Let the battle begin!



18

Of all the blockbuster movies listed on this page, which one will reap the most from the box office? Our money is on today's release, *Shrek the Third*. Why? Because it has Eddie Murphy (a.k.a. money), fart jokes, boogers, and talking cats. Plus, when has Cameron Diaz ever been in a bad movie?



22

NEW RELEASES

- Dawn of Mana - PS2
- Diner Dash - PSP, DS
- Naruto: Ninja Council 3 - DS
- Odin Sphere - PS2
- Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End - PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS, PC
- Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl - Blu-ray
- Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest - Blu-ray

Dawn of Mana - 05/22

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End walks the theatrical plank today. Given the title, we have a feeling that this movie is either about global warming or robots enslaving/nuking humanity. Either way, we can't wait to see Orlando Bloom with that cute little 'stache!



29

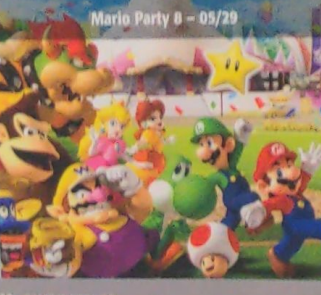
NEW RELEASES

- Alien Syndrome - Wii, PSP
- Dungeons & Dragons Tactics - PSP
- Dorian Odysey - DS
- LA Street Racing - PC
- Mario Party 8 - Wii
- Surf's Up - PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS, PC
- Tomb Raider: Anniversary Edition - PS2, PC

Surf's Up - 05/29



Odin Sphere - 05/22



Mario Party 8 - 05/29



Wallpapers



Games



75555*



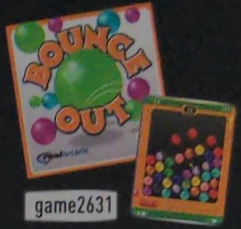
game2630



game2632



game2634



game2631

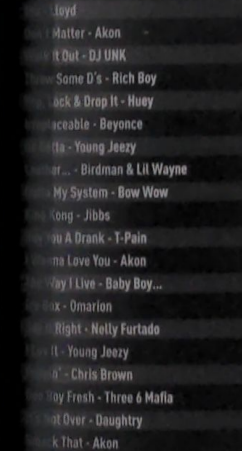


game2633



game2635

Realtones



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true6134

Themes



theme2551

Screensavers



move5634

move5635

move5636

move5637

REALTONES

For a Game Card (Voice) true6125

Money Power Respect true6136

Say Hello To My Little Friend true6137

Time Has Come true6138

Who Do I Trust? true6139

GAME**

Scarface

game2636

Videotones

Video1026 Promiscuous

Video1027 Holly Furtado

Video1028 Push It

Video1029 Rick Ross

Video1030 Use Of An Angel

Video1031 Hinder

Video1032 When We Make

Video1033 Gnuwine

Video1034 Ain't No Other Man

Video1035 C. Anulera

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Grand Theft Auto IV

LET THE
NEXT GENERATION
BEGIN

GRAND THEFT AUTO IV
PLAYSTATION 3
XBOX 360
PC
WII
XBOX 360
PS3
PC
WII

42 GAMESWEEK

"Life is complicated. I killed people. Smuggled people. Sold people. Perhaps here, things will be different." These words, tellingly and optimistically spoken by Grand Theft Auto IV's protagonist, Niko Bellic, don't just speak of a tarnished soul that sees opportunity in a new city. They point directly toward the future of this series.

Like Bellic, Grand Theft Auto is heading to a place where many people have gone to find the so-called "American Dream." Some people call it the Capital of the World. Others have learned that it is the City That Never Sleeps. No matter what you call it, New York City is a place where anything can happen. It is the biggest stage in the world, and the perfect place to enter in the next step for the series.

This new entry marks a number of dramatic changes for the series, but it isn't Grand Theft Auto moving with the real world. New York City doesn't exist in this universe, and it likely never will. The Big Apple is simply being used as an inspirational blueprint for the re-creation of Liberty City, a place some gamers have gotten to know better than their hometowns. While the original Liberty City took many visual cues from New York City, the dramatic recreation of the fictional metropolis seeks to capture the feel of the world's greatest city like never before.

Despite its incredibly large stature, the next installment in the series has remained one of the best kept secrets in the world. Rumors have swirled and speculation has been raised, but nothing that you've heard or read is even close to the truth. Some people thought Grand Theft Auto IV was going to become a massively multiplayer experience, others were certain the game would take place across the entire world. A few misinformed souls even thought the next iteration would be set in space. The truth of the matter, however, is that it's going back to the city that

made this series a phenomenon.

The new Liberty City is a bustling metropolis that is dense on the streets and mind-boggling vertically. Many of New York City's iconic sights find new homes here, and may look strikingly similar, but are twisted to fit into the Grand Theft Auto world. The First Life building, now bearing the name Gorbale, the Statue of Liberty is now the Statue of Happiness, and SHABO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) is called SHABO (Beneath the Offshoot of the Algonquin Bridge Overpass).

"We live there," notes the game's vice president of creative Dan Houser. "We've been there for a number of years. Even the guys in Scotland spend lots of time here with us. It was an environment we felt had never been done to the level we were envisioning it in a video game. From looking at all of the locations, this was the one that really stood out to us, and really had that impact. It has all of these iconic things that you couldn't put into a game before."

While Grand Theft Auto IV, like GTA North, has recreated four of the five boroughs that make up New York City, as well as a section of New Jersey, it's a smaller geographical mass than San Andreas, but not as rich of the world's varied or dedicated to vast stretches of country or desert. It's a tightly packed metropolis that captures the eye with its decades of world-class architecture, sun-baked towers, and extraordinary walls of life. In the GTA universe, Brooklyn has been transformed to Chelsea, Manhattan has mutated into Algonquin,

Queens is now Dulles, The Bronx is Boston, and New Jersey has become Alderney.

"It's not the full city," repeats Houser. "It's an approximation thereof. We make a city that feels like the real thing, but it's perfectly tuned for gameplay in the broadest sense. The world is not designed to be a video game. We are trying to make a video game that feels like the world, but still plays like a video game."

The design of the city and the missions that unfold within it are designed hand-in-hand and complement each other perfectly. Everything in this world is there for a reason, whether it's directly tied to gameplay or simply there to create atmosphere.

"We are trying to give the city next-generation life. Trying to give it the feeling of being there. The feeling of—what to us is always a big part of a Grand Theft Auto game—walking the streets or driving them slowly, watching the life go by, trying to make that a lot more engaging," says Houser. "We are trying to make this something that is more fun, more believable, more alive than it's ever been. That's something we've done a huge amount of work on. To give lots of varied behaviors to the pedestrians, make them more context sensitive, more dependent on the environment. Something that we've done bits of in the past, and really blow that out. When you see the streets, and see that this person's smoking, another person is on the phone, and this other person is sitting on a bench, it feels amazing. It feels a lot more real than just a lot of people walking down the street."



The new Liberty City is modeled directly after New York City

THE HUSTLE & BUSTLE OF A THRIVING METROPOLIS

This city is brought to life with an amazing level of realism. Sunlight glimmers beautifully off of glasswork, illuminates the intricate detailing of century old brick, and even reveals just how realistic an ordinary bag of trash can look. As the sun begins to set, the city takes on a whole different appearance. Buildings that were once eye-popping attractions slowly become ominous obelisks. As any New Yorker will tell you, there's a big difference between New York during the day and New York at night. Liberty City will perfectly capture this quality.

Even the texturing of the Algonquin streets, which are filled with crater-like potholes and occasional glimpses of the brick used in a world gone by, are greatly varied in design and something that you can't tear your eye from. The visual

makeup of the city "was something we could capture real well and really understand the minute aspects of its personality," adds Houser. "Trying to put that into a video game is something that we think is unique to the video game medium. It was a way that we could capture some aspects of the experience of living here that you couldn't put into a film, you couldn't put into a TV show, and you couldn't put into a book — because you are actually wandering about and meeting some of the freaks that you meet on the streets here. And that's what it's all about — meeting the same kind of freaks you'd meet on the streets, the angry yuppies you'd met there. A big part of New York life is walking around the streets and meeting lunatics. That's something

All of the screenshots in this article were taken on an Xbox 360 debug unit, but are not representative of the final quality of the graphics. In the coming months, the game will only look better



A big part of the game is delivering story in new ways and allowing the player to plot their own destiny



that we definitely tried to put into the game. We are trying to give it that life and difference between the neighborhoods and the difference between the kinds of people. We are trying to capture that Capital of the World aspect of New York. There are lots of non-American characters in the game."

One of these foreigners is Niko Bellic. His home is in Eastern Europe, and he likely may never have traveled to Liberty City if it wasn't for his cousin Roman. With life not working out in the homeland, "Bellic turns up in Liberty City because he's been receiving emails from his cousin Roman, that read like: 'I live this amazing life, it's the American Dream come true. I have two women. I have four hot tubs. I have fifteen sports cars,'"



Grand Theft Auto IV is a story seen through the eyes of Niko Bellic — an Eastern European immigrant who has come to Liberty City to live the American Dream

A big part of New York life is walking around the streets and meeting lunatics. That's something that we definitely tried to put into the game.

— Dan Houser
vice president of creative

Houser elaborates. "And [Bellic] believes it." His bid to flee his past for what he thought would be the greener pastures of America couldn't be further from the truth. Roman has been lying to him. He isn't rich. He isn't popular. And he's actually in a load of trouble. He lied to his cousin to hide his own failures in life.

While he may make you contemplate strangling your own flesh and blood, Roman is the only person that you know in America. He serves as one of your main friends, motivations, and connections at the start of the game. Unlike San Andreas, players won't get a chance to see Bellic in his homeland. You will see his life unfold from the moment that he steps into Liberty City. And given

Roman's situation, you have your work cut out for you right off the bat.

"Roman is heavily in debt. Lots of criminals are trying to get heavy with him," comments Houser. "Niko is a tough character. Roman is more of a friendly buffoon. He needs your support, and equally Roman is a high energy optimist that will try to make things happen. It seems like a good dynamic, but they are constantly bickering. Early on it seems like your motivation is to simply make a go of it in a new world, and then we discover, as the game unfolds, that maybe Niko has been avoiding other problems at home."



■ When the sun goes down, you may not want to be found in certain parts of the city. You'll definitely see shifts in the people that walk the streets

One of our biggest goals early in development is that it should feel different than any other game. It shouldn't be 'Oh here's a really good looking, but stiff character.'



■ The detailing of the city goes well beyond anything that we've seen in a game before

JUST ANOTHER ORDINARY DAY

The demo we were fortunate enough to see, running on an Xbox 360, begins with Bellic standing inside of the taxi depot that Roman runs out of the borough of Broker in a converted industrial garage. The game's newfound graphical muscle dances across the screen. Roman's desk is cluttered with garbage and paperwork, the walls desperately need a new coat of paint, and the windows of the depot appear to never have been cleaned. The sun is shining brightly outside, but you wouldn't know it from the light that is passing through the windows—a dirty, yellowish hue that barely gives off enough illumination for operations to be conducted. The only life that this office has is a radio belting out music in ear-piercing mono, and Bellic, standing tall, confident, and ready for action.

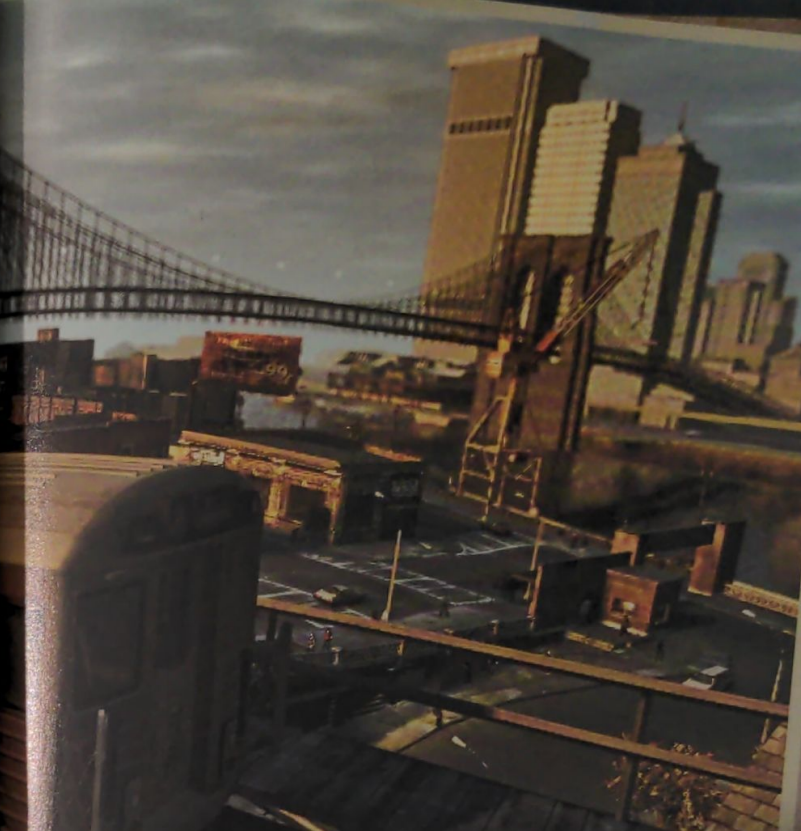
While Bellic could do his cousin a favor by tidying up the place, he has other business to take care of. As he leaves the office, you feel the weight behind each step he makes. Variations in the terrain are met with realistic changes in the walking animation. As Bellic turns and maneuvers his body in different ways on his walk, you can see that his movements are fueled by an incredible physics engine.

"The physics are going to be pretty amazing,"

Houser interjects. "We are trying, like all things with this game, to push the physics forward. Physics is an area where games can get much better. If you are into third-person action games, physics need to be amazing. The feeling of controlling your character needs to be amazing. The feeling of running around that environment, climbing over things, needs to be a lot more than it has been. The animations can't feel canned and predictable. One of our biggest goals early in development is that it should feel different than any other game. It shouldn't be 'Oh here's a really good looking, but stiff character.'"

Bellic is anything but stiff, and it would appear that he isn't the most sensitive or honest lad around, either. His walk concludes at a brownstone. Despite the two people—friends, possibly neighbors—having a conversation on the stoop next door, Bellic pushes the door open—again a motion fueled by the sense of weight and a realistic accompanying animation. It becomes obvious that this isn't Bellic's house, as he quickly clings to a wall and pulls out a pistol. One quick look around the corner reveals that the living room, furnished in '70s browns and greens, is not occupied. Bellic slowly slides into the room with his pistol drawn high

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48 >>



■ Many of Niko's activities revolve around being a criminal, being an Eastern European in a new place, and Liberty City itself



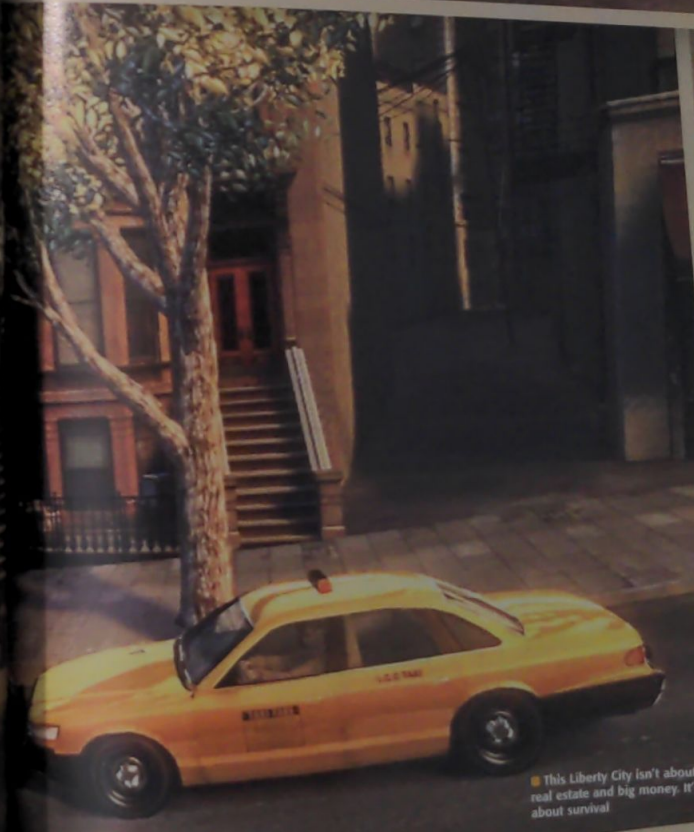
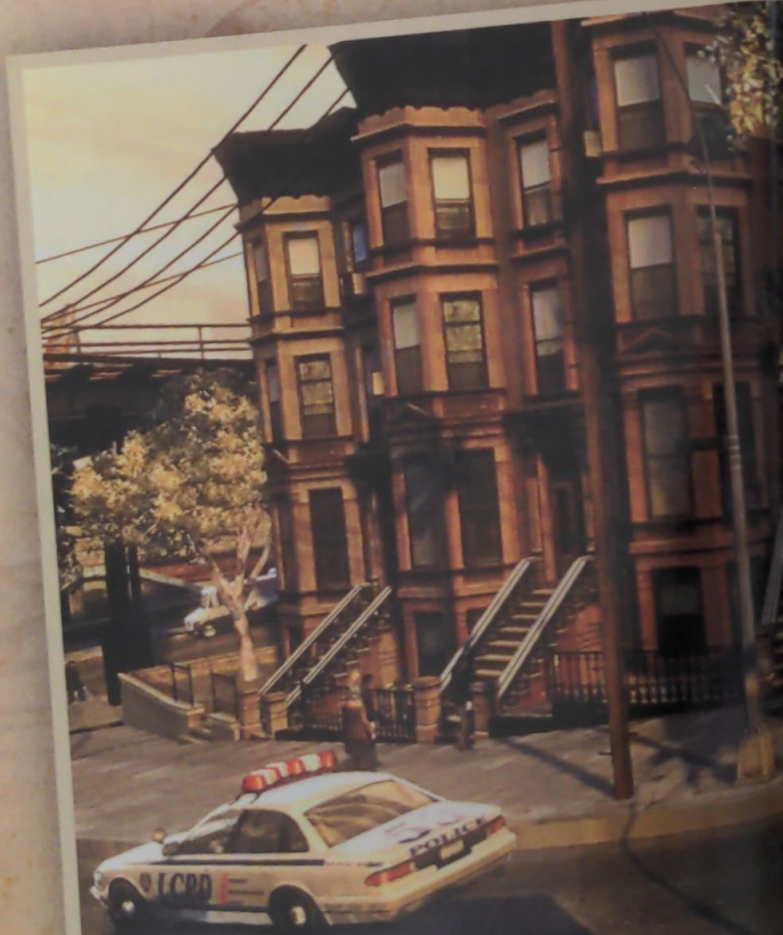
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 46

and pointed to a well-lit kitchen. With one leg stepping over the other in a strafing motion, he then sees that the kitchen is clear as well. There's nobody in this small house. The urgency in his steps intensifies, and he pushes his way through the back door.

Once on the street, he makes a beeline for a parked car—a beautifully detailed and finely polished red four-door that appears to be the primary mode of transportation for one of Broker's successful families. Instead of trying the handle to see if the car is unlocked, Bellic smashes in the window with his elbow. The glass tumbles on the street and seat as Bellic unlocks the door from the inside. A master of hotwiring, he has the car roaring in a second flat. As he drives to his next destination, Houser points out that all the vehicles in the game also feature new physics. The camera angle behind the car is noticeably closer than it has been in any other Grand Theft Auto. Not only does this bring out better detail in the vehicles, it allows players to see more of the verticality of the city.

After fussing with the radio stations and finding a calming melody for his drive, Bellic cautiously navigates a section of the BOARIO, arriving at a dockside area with an amazing view of downtown Liberty and its skyline. At the dock, the squawks of pigeons and the rustling of waves drown out the horns and chatter of the city's residents, and you can almost sense that Bellic is calmed by the change in scenery. After walking directly over to the water, which looks completely lifelike, he puts a leg up onto a broken concrete wall and pulls out his cell phone. This action brings up a magnified view of the phone onto the HUD. The options presented on the phone's LCD are Phonebook, Messages, Organizer, and Camera. After selecting Phonebook, Bellic is faced with another set of options: City Contact, Docks Friend, and Cab Contact. We're not sure who Bellic ends up calling, but after a brief conversation, he informs the man on the other end of the line to meet him at the docks.

"I live this amazing life, it's the American Dream come true. I have two women. I have four hot tubs. I have fifteen sports cars, and [Bellic] believes it."



■ This Liberty City isn't about real estate and big money. It's about survival.



■ You really get a sense of how real this world is when you see a new car in front of a decades-old apartment.

A NEW LEVEL OF FREEDOM

"In all previous GTA games you might have felt like a slave," opines Houser. "You are ordered by people to do things. Now, there's still going to be an element of that because you are an underling that people tell what to do for large parts of the game, but you can also choose how you want to spend your time. I want to hang out with him and her. I want to go and see this guy because he always has fun things to do. Call him up and maybe you can hang with him. Maybe he'll answer. That's a fun way of navigating the story and navigating the world and your time in it. You have a lot of choice over what you want to do."

Storytelling is a huge focus in this next installment, and it will be reflected through the various ways you can interact with the city and its denizens. According to Houser, Rockstar North is giving people more freedom, more choice, and more sense of control over their destiny. The game still follows a narrative path, but it's quite different in its structure. "The story is told in a number of different ways," adds Houser. "But we've tried to replicate as many ways possible that you engage with people. There's talking [in person], cell phones, and a bunch of other ways of giving the player information. We are trying to use that kind of stuff to give you back story or front story, or to explain character motivation."

"You still meet people, get missions by them, do the missions, and if you do well they will help you. Or they may stab you in the back. We tried to provide more diversity to the missions. We tried to provide certain choices about the missions. We've tried to give branches that maybe give you a critical choice, new ways of interacting with characters, and new ways of interacting with the world. It's a different kind of experience."

In previous Grand Theft Auto titles, the goal was always very clear cut. You start out small and work your way up to the top. Bellic's story isn't a rags-to-riches tale, nor is it rags-to-rags. It's rags to somewhere in

between — leaving a world of imagination as to where his actions will bring him — especially with Rockstar hinting heavily at the idea of players plotting their own destiny. When asked about this, Houser points out that “you are just one fish in a big pond of other fish. New York motivation isn’t just about turning up here and becoming the king. That’s an impossible goal.”

Over the last console generation, Grand Theft Auto has become a series of period pieces. Vice City was set in the ‘80s, and San Andreas took place in the ‘90s. Not since GTA III, a game also featuring Liberty City, has Rockstar North approached a contemporary piece. In Grand Theft Auto IV, we are stepping into Liberty City as seen in 2007. It’s a bigger city, and a different age. These are both things that could have a huge effect on the way that you approach your criminal activities.

“From conversations we had with a lot of crime experts and a lot of ex-policemen, we learned that it’s very hard to be a criminal nowadays,” Houser says with a smile. “The glory days of that stuff are over. That was something that we definitely tried to capture in the story and the experience of the game. People are constantly getting arrested. The police are a heavy presence.”

MORE THAN YOU WOULD EXPECT

In terms of scale, this GTA experience shouldn’t be much different than San Andreas. The only noticeable difference is that players won’t be able to pilot airplanes. “There are no planes, because it’s just a city,” adds Houser. “Apart from the fact that [the vehicles] are similar. We want it to feel realistic and gritty. [Bellic] is not going to be riding a unicycle or rollerblading. We are giving choice and variety that feels right for that character. We’re not suddenly saying there are no motorbikes. We are keeping all of that stuff. It’s the same range and diversity that we had, but to fit the character.”

Speaking of elements of the game that bring out the realism of the character, Houser admits that Rockstar North is approaching the recruitment of voice actors in a different way. Reading between the lines, this likely means less familiar voices, and more voices that fit the desired attitude of the characters. Bellic’s deep Eastern European accent fits his gritty exterior, and the chatter heard in the streets just screams New York.

The same thought process is being applied to the soundtrack and radio stations. “We’ve raided the past heavily,” Houser admits. “We are going to get some great music that works with the 2007 Liberty City. We’ve set the benchmark for game soundtracks in the past, and I don’t think we’ve been surpassed in that; I think we’ve done some really

You are just one fish in a big pond of other fish. New York motivation isn’t just about turning up here and becoming the king. That’s an impossible goal.



Rockstar wouldn’t reveal details surrounding the targeting system just yet, but Houser did admit that it is something that they are working very hard on, and that they feel they’ve found the sweet spot with it.



amazing stuff. I think we are going to do something wicked this time. We’re pretty confident on that. It’s a great way of giving you, the player, part of the experience in a way that no other medium can. You can have songs that fit your mood. I want this music to be hardcore because I am in a hardcore mood. Going out for a date with a girl, so I need something more romantic. We pick tracks that fit the tempo of the game. It’s not a pedal-to-the-metal racing game. It’s an urban cruising gangster game. We pick music that we think works with that kind of experience. It’s got to be of a certain tempo or a certain feel no matter what genre it’s in. The debate that goes into every single track you would not believe. There are a large number of music fans that pick this stuff.”

With more realistic tones accompanying the visuals, it’s easy to think that this GTA experience will abandon the series’ trademark humor for more serious content. It will certainly feel like more of a realistic experience, but the humor will still be fully intact. Whether you are listening to advertisements on the radio, hear someone mumble something on the street, or read a billboard, Liberty City will still be a wild place. The same team, with the same sense of humor, is bringing this game to life.

This is something that even now, Houser finds amazing. “Some people talk about it like it’s a franchise. I think of it as a series of games made by the same people. Since GTA III, we still have exactly the same people. We’ve added some great people on top of that, but it’s the same two lead programmers, same physics guy, same producer, same executive producer, same writer, same audio guys, same designers. They are all in place. No one’s left.”

“That’s what is so exciting. And what’s been such a great experience for everyone involved in working on these games is that we managed to develop it as a core group together. We haven’t lost any of the key talent. They’ve added great people in there. That kind of consistency has given everyone confidence in working with each other, and an understanding of what we are trying to do, and an

ambition that I don’t think is matched anywhere else. Where people come and people go, and the franchise lives on. The franchise is the people who make this game — it’s this core group of people. I think that’s something that sets us apart from a lot of places.”

It’s that and the fact that the team is trying things that no one has with video games. Grand Theft Auto brought new definition to the action genre, and showed us that not every decision that the player makes has to be linear and tied to a path. With Grand Theft Auto IV, the team is finding new ways to approach storytelling, movement, and the level of interaction the player has within the world. This tight-knit team continues to improve with each new product it touches. Some of the content is amusing, like being able to call a woman for a date. And some of its achievements simply blow your mind, such as its load times. After an initial loading sequence, the game will never load again — even when you transition between interior and exterior locations.

Rather than outsourcing the technology that Rockstar North utilizes, Rockstar as a whole has set up a studio of programmers in San Diego that does nothing but work on the company’s proprietary technologies. The engine of note is called R.A.G.E. (Rockstar Advanced Game Engine). You already got a brief taste of it with Table Tennis, and will get a much larger dose when Grand Theft Auto IV hits the streets on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 on October 16.

Both versions of the game will likely be identical, but Rockstar has confirmed that downloadable content will be exclusive to the Xbox 360 version. This content is said to be sizeable, and when asked about whether or not we would see this impressive new take on Liberty City living on past one game, Houser grins and says one thing: “episodic content.”

Like all of the Grand Theft Autos that have come before this one, the experience is largely for the single player. The game will have multiplayer,

however. “Yes, there will be some,” Houser comments. “It’s not going to be a massively multiplayer online game, but we are trying to make something that is interesting, fun, and progressive, and goes nicely alongside the single-player game.”

It’s been in development for over three years, and Houser isn’t shy about admitting that this has been a lengthy experience already. “We knew to do something at this scale would take a very long time. Just to make graphics like that is very time consuming. The assets are big and heavy.”

Whether it changes the face of gaming again like it did in the previous generation remains to be seen, but Rockstar North knows exactly where this series needs to go next, and is running that extra mile to get it there and make it a new experience yet again.

Houser equates the leap that this installment is making to that which the series made between the first Grand Theft Auto and Grand Theft Auto III. This is a huge step to make — something that we really haven’t witnessed yet on the next-generation machines.

“Everyone always says, ‘Books tell you something, movies show you something, and games let you do something.’ [That is why games] were more interesting,” says Houser. “And that was why games were going to take over. Games let you be somewhere. That’s an amazing quality. That is something you just can’t get from any other medium. The chance to exist in this fantasy world, be it Liberty City, be it Mars, or wherever, I think is a really interesting side of what games are going to offer as an artistic medium and as an entertainment medium. What we tried to do this time was massively enhance the experience of being there. Completely transform it so that the way the story unfolds, the way you deal with characters, the way the world behaves, the things that you can do, all of them give you this reason why you might want to be there and this sensation of living in this world.” ■■■



This shot shows off the busy streets of Algonquin and also the behaviors of the people within it. Some people are doing some casual shopping, others are buying everything in sight and have multiple bags. One man is carrying a box, another is drinking a beverage. Some people look like they are conversing. Another appears to be late for a meeting and is high tailing it on foot.

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
 > STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
 > PUBLISHER 2K SPORTS
 > DEVELOPER VISUAL CONCEPTS
 > RELEASE SUMMER



THE RETURN OF



THE COMEBACK KID

They don't call the NFL the "No Fun League" for nothing. Whether it's touching the QB or showing off your personality in a touchdown celebration, the league is likely against it. Nobody knows this better than gamers. By approaching Electronic Arts with an exclusive licensing deal, the NFL has shut down what once was a fun and beneficial rivalry between EA and NFL 2K5 developer Visual Concepts. "Get over it," says Jeff Thomas, VC's vice president of sports development, because there's no looking back.

That's not to say, however, that the NFL's decision didn't have a sizable effect on the company. "I don't know if that was black Friday, Thursday, or whatever day of the week it was," Jeff offers, "but it was definitely a huge impact for us." In fact, it was a while before Visual Concepts got over it themselves. The deal forced a span of forced introspection in late 2004. Jeff laughs as he remembers that period. "Holy crap, what are we going to do now?"

It was during this time that every possibility was laid on the table and examined. A few obscure football organizations called up the company and wanted it to make a football game based on their leagues. Another idea was to continue the NFL 2K5 develop-

ment line and quickly put out a game to compete with Midway's Blitz: The League. By the end of 2005, Electronic Arts had sown up exclusive deals with the NCAA and Arena Football League, effectively shutting the licensing door on Visual Concepts.

But the more that EA seemingly cornered the company, the clearer VC's focus became. "We always kept football in our hearts," declares Jeff. "Football has always been active at VC on some level."

Sitting in the modest office of Visual Concepts president Greg Thomas (Jeff's brother) in the company's newly decked out building in Marin County, California, it's hard to imagine that the people who brought us the NFL 2K franchise would ever not

be involved in football. Thinking back, Greg doesn't deny that getting to where they are now was hard. "That was a rough time. We had to reset. We had to really think about everything we were going to do. Everyone here thought about it. We had so many meetings. It all came back to one thing. It's all about the game of football."

It was then that the team realized that the goal of any football game—whether it has a license or not—is to represent the sport and its fans with high-quality gameplay. The importance of timing, as is the case with any pivotal situation, is key. And despite all appearances, Visual Concepts' timing was good.

■ "You can't teach that!" Dan Stevens and Peter O'Keefe return to call all the action



PUTTING THE "I" IN "TEAM"

"Reality kind of sunk in," Jeff explains. "We looked at what we had here at VC and said, 'You know what? I think we need to concentrate on next-gen.' It took us this long to do something that was compelling." Of course, the next generation of consoles is an advantage for any company, but instead of putting out a football product to coincide with the launch of the Xbox 360 or even PlayStation 3, the team decided to dig as deep into these new systems as they could. "I want to provide something that feels like, 'This is the way next-generation games should play.'"

How do you get to the core of a realistic football experience when it is so completely tied to the NFL teams we know so well? Go

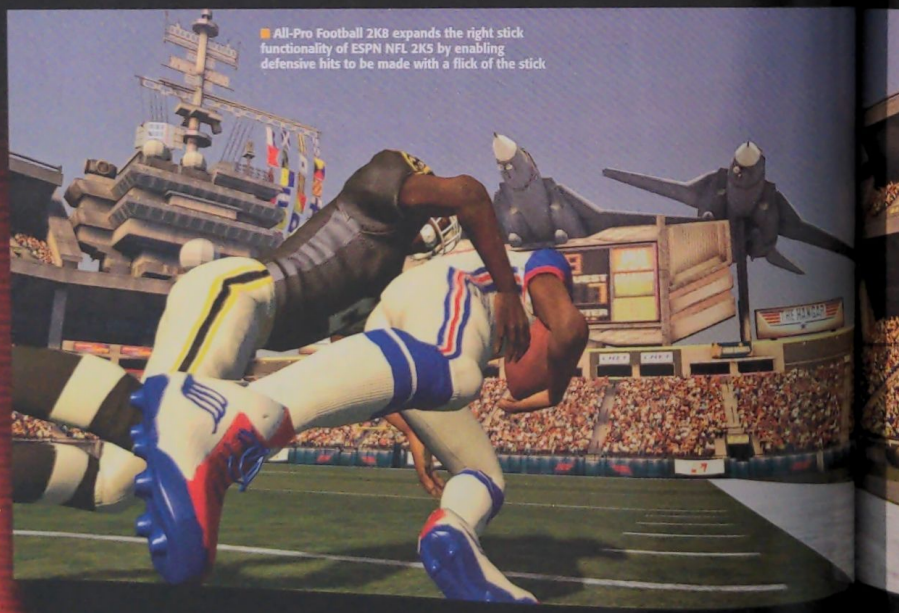
beyond the teams themselves. All-Pro Football 2K8 aims to take the ultimate team sport and turn its focus onto the individual players. This is done by highlighting the separation in skill among players and translating that onto the field.

An important part of making individual players stand out is by getting away from the normal 0-100 attribute system we've seen in most sports games. Instead, players will be separated into tiers, with everyone having icons associated with them. These represent the positive and negative traits that define who they are on the field, such as a mobile QB who is a fumbler. Superstars also possess separate special abilities such as being good at fourth-quarter comebacks. These will give them further personality and differentiate them from the regular players. However,

even the lower-ranked players will have key skills that will come in handy.

Gamers will build their team from a pool of players. Here is where you can play GM and mold the team to your liking. Because you don't have to wonder about the difference between an 80- or 81-rated wide receiver, you have a better idea how to combine these individuals to shape your team's playing philosophy as well as its overall strengths and weaknesses. Once play begins, you can create and exploit mismatches among players and tailor your game plan to your strengths. This will be immediately evident when you take the game online. Here you can create multiple teams and pick which one gives you the best chance of winning when matched up against your opponent's own creations.

■ All-Pro Football 2K8 expands the right stick functionality of ESPN NFL 2K5 by enabling defensive hits to be made with a flick of the stick



WHAT ARE LEGENDS MADE OF?

It's a poorly kept secret that All-Pro Football will feature NFL legends, who circumvent the league's exclusive licensing deal simply because they are retired. Visual Concepts wouldn't say anything on this topic, although it certainly didn't deny that NFL legends are in the picture. We have an understanding that they will be included in some way, but the developer just isn't willing to divulge the details yet.



“PLAY THE GAME AND SHUT UP”

JEFF THOMAS

VICE PRESIDENT OF SPORTS DEVELOPMENT

■ Visual Concepts promises that CPU opponents will use more play disguises, audibles, and other such trickery

By making the player aware of the prowess of individual football players and the strategies behind utilizing them, the game actually makes its teams stronger than they might have been if they had been ruled by the NFL license. Because the team isn't bound by trying to recreate how the Patriots play (which games rarely do right) or whether the third-string linebacker has an acceleration rating of 73 or 70, it lets you create and exploit the differences among teams.

A NEW DOWN & DISTANCE

All-Pro's lack of traditional player ratings isn't the only way it will break with convention. Although the developer wouldn't go into detail about the game's league structure, we know that there won't be a franchise mode. No guiding your team through multiple years or drafting for the future. Also missing are first-person football and The Crib. This is disappointing – and rival Madden got slammed for its feature pullback when it switched over to the new generation, but Jeff is adamant in the developer's approach. "You have to pick some things and focus. The idea of this game is not to encompass every feature in every football game."

Likewise, although the game will feature a number of customization features for your team, including

options beyond the standard package for online play, you won't be able to recreate NFL teams or players. "I've decided a long time ago we're not doing that," says Jeff. "[That option] is not in the game, and people gotta be aware of that right now. It's not NFL poseur. There's going to be a backlash, I know that. And you know what? Play the game and shut up."

Although seemingly confrontational, his insistence brings out an important point about this game. Instead of banking on familiar territory, Visual Concepts is staking this game's fortunes on showing you what it thinks has been missing from football games in the past – including its own.

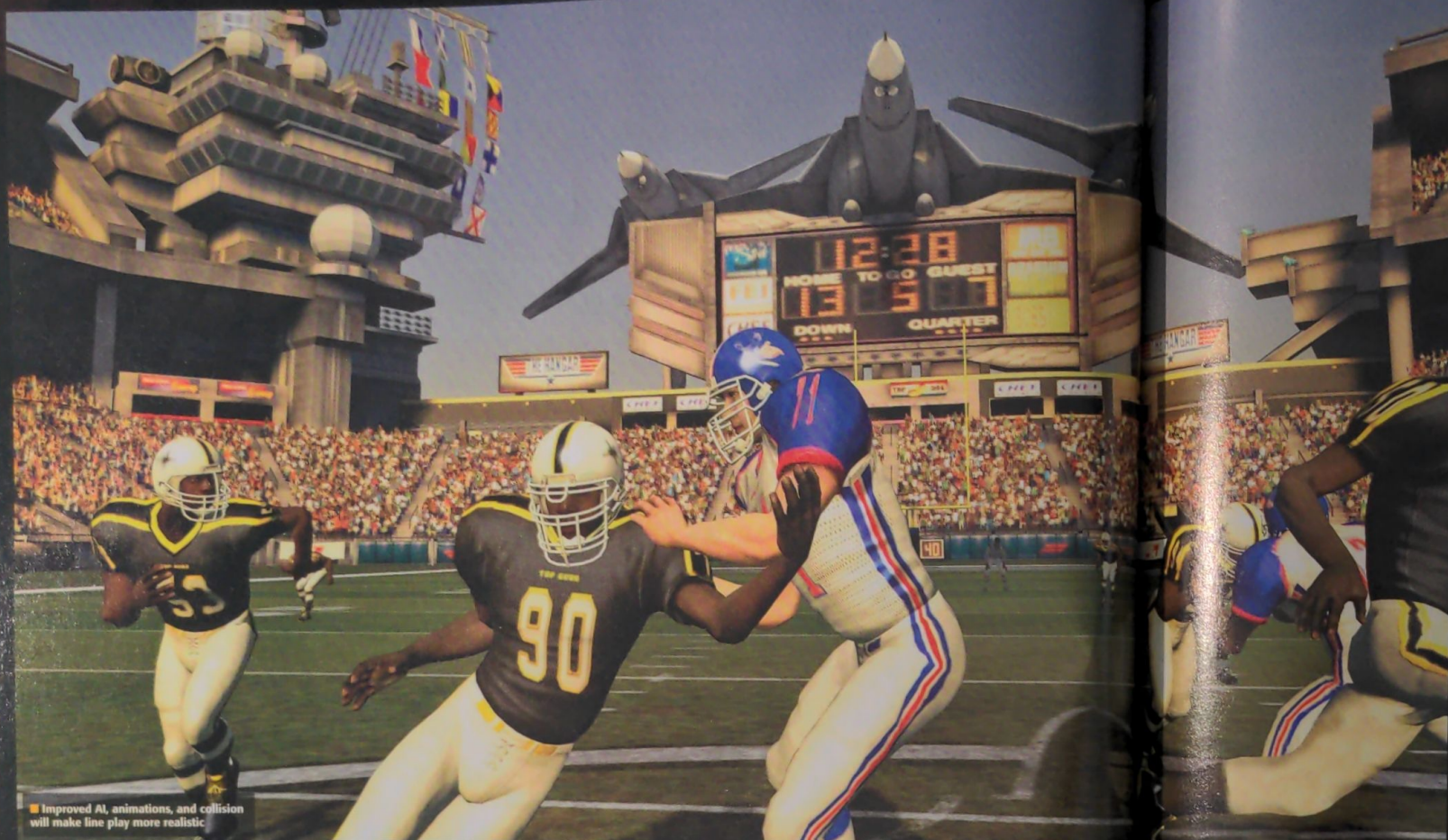
"I look at the AI on [NFL] 2K5 now and go, 'Wow, the AI was just stupid. It did stupid things a lot,'" says Jeff. The CPU AI will now make full use of its playbooks, players, and pay more attention to how you play the game – things that were noticeably absent from NFL 2K5. Defenses utilize different formation shells (which you can also use) in order to confuse you. So you might come up to the line of scrimmage and see the defense in a three-deep zone when they are actually running something entirely different.

A more startling example of the strides APF makes is in the running game, where CPU backs have been taught to see holes and cutback lanes to prevent them from running into the backs of their blockers.

In fact, the team has an AI test they call "AI or Abe I?" named after Abe Navarro, their producer. Navarro starts running plays with his hands hidden from view. The test is to see if a bystander can correctly guess whether the play they are seeing is the computer or Abe himself. The team's gotten the CPU to mimic human tendencies to the point that nobody's gotten more than three out of five right, and president Greg Thomas went a laughable zero for five.

Perhaps more important than getting your CPU opponent to play correctly, however, is the work being done to make sure your own players respond to your commands. "I want to give them what they want when they press that button," says Jeff, expressing the frustration of gamers the world over when their wide-open receiver can't even move his hands a couple of inches to adjust to the oncoming ball or a defensive back isn't able to swat the ball even though you've put him in the right position.

A key component to stemming this disbelief is refining the game's animation system. We've seen early footage of some of APF's animations, and it's clear that some of the bad transitions between player movements from the past have been cleaned up, leaving very fluid play – even on complicated matters such as the interaction between the offensive and defensive lines. A good example of the game's



Improved AI, animations, and collision will make line play more realistic.

blending of AI and animations is in your QB's ability to throw the ball while he's getting tackled. The resulting toss will be subject to all kinds of variables to determine how bad of a throw it is, but giving the player the option to follow-through with a throw or tuck the ball before it's released shows a lot of confidence in the gameplay.

OUTSIDE THE LINES

As much as the NFL license benefits a football game, Visual Concepts is going out of its way to make use of those areas that the NFL restricts. In tandem with the game's refined animation system, injuries will now occur in real time. We've seen plays where a guy lands funny and gets his head twisted or he lands on his arm the wrong way producing an injury. Previously, the NFL wouldn't allow this because it didn't like directly associating violent hits with players getting injured. This includes major concussions produced after particularly jarring blows and being able to throw late hits. To be clear, All-Pro is not an over-the-top, Blitz-style game; but football is a violent sport, and the team is trying to represent this faithfully without NFL restrictions.

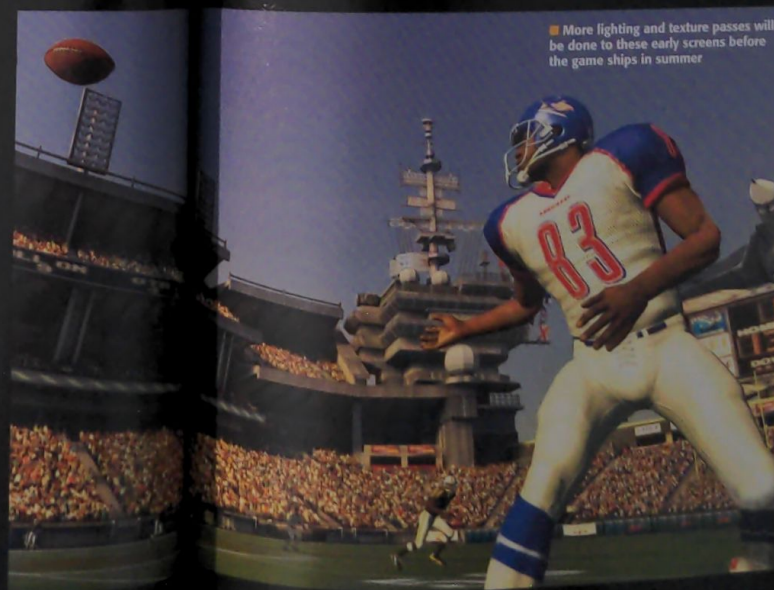
Another area the game can expand on is the actual on-field speech that goes on during a game, whether that's trash talking between players or dialogue between a coach and a QB. The NFL and the Players' Association don't allow for specific dialogue to be assigned to players because it doesn't want to put words in Peyton Manning's mouth, for example. Of course, All-Pro doesn't have to worry about that, so you'll see players and coaches talking to each other complete with full lip-synching. This won't be a constant element of All-Pro Football, but it will be a key element of the game's overall presentation—an area in which Visual Concepts' work is well regarded.

Will it all work? Can you sell a non-licensed football game to a country that is obsessed with the NFL? As confident as the team at Visual Concepts is, those are the million dollar questions that nobody can answer right now. "We're not sure how everyone's going to take it," admits Greg. "This, to me, is people looking for their football fix. They may also buy Madden, but it's about playing the best one." ■■■



THE STADIUMS

Instead of showing boring fly-bys of steel girders in NFL stadiums, All-Pro's digs are stylized to the hilt. Each team (with names like the Rhinos, Iron Men, Cobras, etc.) will feature their own theme that comes through in the architecture and in events such as touchdown celebrations. The Rhinos' stadium, for example, has an animatronic Rhino that bursts out of the stands. Fans in the crowd will consist of 64 different models complete with 64 different animations. Presentation cutscenes will even zoom in on these fan models. Weather will also be a big part of the stadium experience, right down to creating more slippery playing conditions.



More lighting and texture passes will be done to these early screens before the game ships in summer.





PREVIEWS

A Glimpse Into The Future Of Gaming



UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Forza Motorsport 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT > DEVELOPER TURN 10 STUDIOS > RELEASE MAY

PAINTER PARADISE

You want to talk numbers for a minute? Forza 2 boasts some impressive stats. More than 300 licensed cars, 45 tracks across 12 environments, and upwards of three hours of licensed music. But if numbers aren't enough to get your heart pumping, take another look at these screens. Forza 2 looks good, and there are plenty of reasons for this. More numbers, too: 60 frames per second with 2x full-screen anti-aliasing, high-dynamic-range lighting, and 720p. But wait, don't fall asleep. You're not in math class, and Forza 2 promises to play as true to life as it looks.

One area where Forza 2 is trying to raise the bar is in car customization. "In the original Forza Motorsport, we thought 400-plus layers would be sufficient," game director Dan Greenawalt told us. "However, after we saw the level of artist in the community, we realized that there is a class of artist out there that could use 4,000-plus." Players can also take

their visual sets and apply them to any car in their garage, or they can lock it to a specific car and take that car to sell in an online auction.

Car damage also returns to Forza 2. "If you crash, your car will run differently depending on the damage," Greenawalt tells us. "If your bumper gets knocked off, it will stay on the track for the rest of the race and add another degree of difficulty and realism — no mysterious vanishing parts in Forza Motorsport 2." And this level of realism extends to Forza 2's physics engine that has to run at a whopping 360 fps to keep pace with these cars and helps give them a more realistic feel.

You can play with seven other people online or hop on Forza Motorsport 2 TV and get tips by watching the best racers in the world in what Greenawalt says "is like watching a virtual customized car show." It's hard to believe that we are on the cusp of getting our hands on this promising racer. ■ ■ ■

Look closely and you can actually see your reflection in the taillight



A nice example of Forza 2's damage system



According to Greenawalt, Nurburgring is one of the reasons they need to run the physics at 360 frames per second. These cars are running at 180mph. At 60fps, that's one frame every 4 feet. "At this update rate, physics fidelity is lost," says Greenawalt

IN CARS

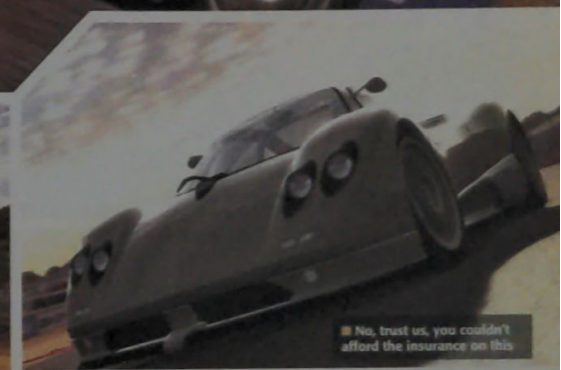
We still don't know Forza 2's complete list of cars, but it will consist of over 300 vehicles from more than 50 of the world's top manufacturers including Audi, BMW, Lotus, Jaguar, and Porsche. But there are plenty that we already know about and can't wait to drive. You could dip these babies in pink paint and plaster our face on the side with a word bubble that says "I love unicorns," and we'd still drive them.

- Porsche brings 13 sports cars to the table. Highlights include the 911 Turbo, the 1970 Porsche, and the 1987 Porsche 959
- There will be 15 different models from Ferrari including the 2004 Ferrari F430, which happens to be one of developer Dan Greenawalt's favorite cars. His favorite track? Sebring
- Of course, our favorite is the Lamborghini Murcielago, but Lamborghini's Italian division, Maserati, is also in Forza 2 with its 2004 MC12 and the 2006 GranSport



RACE 07:55.320
Best 1:45.526
Lap 0:39.240

1. Equally 968
2. Nubuchan... 167
3. Drift King 182
PLACE 2 8



No, trust us, you couldn't afford the insurance on this

WHO WOULD ACTUALLY DO THIS?

If you want the ultimate setup you can hook up 4 Xboxes with 4 copies of the game to 4 TVs to get a wider view of the track (one TV can even function as a rearview mirror). Or you could collect 6 Xboxes, games, and TVs for a full 360° view of the action. We don't know who can even afford this ridiculous set up, but we want to party at their house.



Johnny Mowlem from the Risi Competizione team practices, in between heats, off the track at the American LeMans Series at Sebring in March. They ended up winning the event

PLAYSTATION 3

Warhawk

> STYLE UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK > PUBLISHER SONY
COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > DEVELOPER INCOGNITO > RELEASE FALL

YEP, IT'S JUST MULTIPLAYER

There have been plenty of rumors flying around about this game ever since its showing back at E3. Sony is at least putting some of them to rest now. Warhawk is most definitely an exclusively online multiplayer game. Absolutely no single-player campaign is included. What Sony still hasn't decided on, however, is if the game will be all boxed up at retail or if it will only be available via download from the PlayStation Store. Either way, we got some good hands-on time with the latest direction Warhawk is headed.

The one playable map took place in a bombed out city with plenty of room for driving and flying vehicles about. Players take either the Eucadian or Chemovan side and can fully customize the look of their character. They'll be able to charge in on foot with over 20 weapons to choose between ranging from machine guns to rocket launchers to flamethrowers. Additionally, players can man several different kinds of turrets to get a leg up on other soldiers or even the odds against a tank.

A mix of ground and air vehicles are spread around the bases ripe for the taking. Those looking for a speedy ride can jump in a jeep with buddy riding shotgun and another in the back handling turret duties. Others may go for the tank just for the sheer firepower. To take to the skies, you'll want a

warhawk or nemesis. Here you'll be able to unleash homing missiles, electric blasts, remote controlled missiles, and even try some sneaky cloaked maneuvers. Motion controls are optional on all vehicle types so you can flip it off for jeeps and on for planes, for example. For the most part, either control option works smoothly, and transitioning in and out of vehicles is seamless.

The final game will include 25 maps and standard modes like team deathmatch, capture the flag, and territories. A unique mode called Zone encourages players to control more of the map to earn more resources. Loads of rewards, badges, medals, ribbons, and rankings will help the world know about your mad skills. And just because Warhawk is all multiplayer doesn't mean you can't share a match on the same PS3 with a friend. All he or she has to do is hit the start button with an extra controller any time during the middle of a match and the screen will immediately split to accommodate both of you.

Warhawk's lack of single-player may be a disappointment, but hopefully it will help multiplayer be the best that it can be. Though it still has a ways to go, the potential for out-of-control vehicular combat is positively there. We'll definitely be keeping an eye on this one as it progresses. ■ ■ ■



"This is a battle I do not think we can win"



Warhawks are great at air-to-ground attacks... as long as you don't hover in one place for too long



Dogfights can get quite intense



CHIEF: FLYN: Flag Dropper by CaptainVegetable



Enlisting a buddy to man the turret is essential for staying alive in heavily infested areas



"I think that was a jeep at some point"



previews



Cluster bombs are weak individually, but they cast a wide net



Bridges serve as excellent choke points for action

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2

Stuntman: Ignition

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** PARADIGM ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** SUMMER

STOP, DROP, AND ROLL

The repetitive nature of the first Stuntman game put out by Atari in 2002 made you want to smash your head through your windshield. Now that the game is in the hands of developer Paradigm and publisher THQ, changes have been made to keep the series' high-octane thrills intact without the hassle of load times or an overly strict difficulty level.

At the recent THQ Gamers' Day, we got plenty of hands-on time with the game, and found that this sequel does indeed run leaner and meaner than its predecessor. Whereas the first game required you to hit time gates in order to keep progressing through a scene, Ignition (while still having time gates) is based on a five-strike system. Miss a time gate or a major stunt and you'll be charged a strike.

Despite this more forgiving setup, don't think for a second that the series' love of fast-paced, gonzo driving stunts has been reigned in at all. Quite the contrary. The first of the game's six movies is *AfterShock*, which is a natural disaster flick complete with a towering inferno of spewing lava, earthquake fissures, and a few surprising moments.

We struggled a bit initially with the first scene (each film contains about six scenes), but it was immediately evident that the more forgiving star system made the flow of the game simply more fun. Another key factor in this is the fact that you can now string together moves for big combo bonuses. Because you can earn these extra points by getting into close calls, bumping traffic, going airborne, or drifting around corners, you can in effect create your own stunts in-between the actions you have to perform for your director.

As in the first Stuntman, you'll get to see a trailer of your stunts once you finish all the scenes for a movie. Depending on how well you do, you can also win Stuntman awards. Another new tweak to the original is the game's overall pacing, which opens up your next movie earlier than before. This way you can jump to another scene and come back to one that might be giving you trouble. Online play will separate the joes from the pros, although THQ isn't saying much about this portion of the game other than to say that this mode will incorporate both competitive and co-op play. ■ ■ ■



■ Unlike the first Stuntman, Ignition hopes to balance difficulty and fun

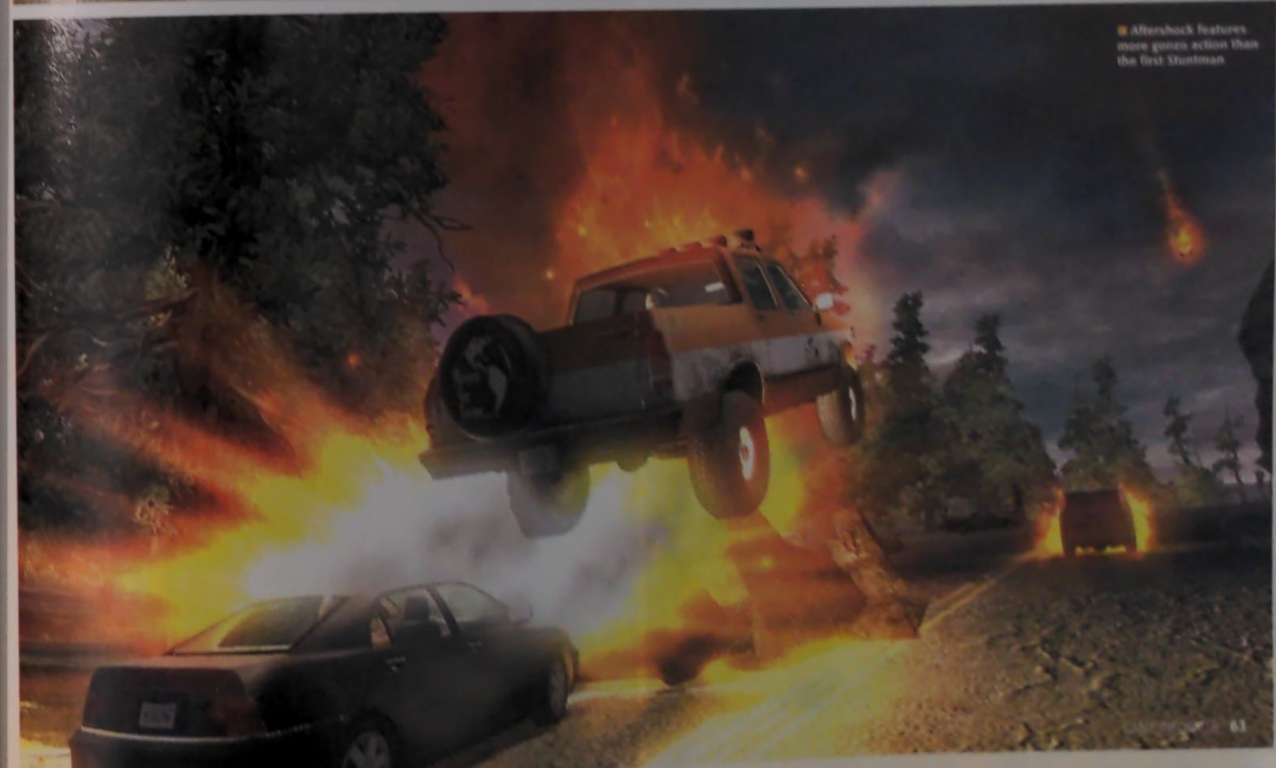


IGNITION IN OVERDRIVE

Set in a San Francisco-esque town of docks and hills, some of the scenes in *Overdrive* can get pretty technical, requiring you to floor your car backwards under a passing semi and whip it around 180 degrees once on the other side.



■ AfterShock features more gonzo action than the first Stuntman



■ As you can see, *Manhunt 2* is every bit as grim as the original

Wii | PLAYSTATION 2 | PSP

Manhunt 2

■ **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION ■ **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES
 ■ **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR LONDON (PS2, PSP), ROCKSTAR TORONTO (Wii)
 ■ **RELEASE** SUMMER

SLIPPING INTO DARKNESS

Manhunt is one of the most underappreciated games of the PS2 generation, a dark and brutal exploration of violence that brought Rockstar's uncompromising vision into the stealth genre. More serious in tone than the satirical *Grand Theft Auto* series, the game wasn't an enormous blockbuster, but did earn a sizeable cult of fans. These fans will be pleased to learn that *Manhunt* is returning, with a surprising twist.

First off, this game is not a sequel, at least not in the traditional sense. Although much of the gameplay (as well as the emphasis on bloody violence) is still intact, the plot and characters are completely new, with no crossovers with the original saga of death row inmate James Earl Cash.

Our new protagonist, scientist Dr. Daniel Lamb, is a much different man than Cash. In fact, he's not a criminal at all, but rather a family man working on a top secret neurological weapons program. After funding for the risky program is pulled, Lamb's boss, Dr. Pickman, takes the program underground. Lamb, a true believer, volunteers to be a test patient against the protests of his wife. Sadly, this decision is a tragic one. After the experiment, Daniel suffers from intense psychosis and paranoia. This eventually leads him to a cell in the Dixmore Hospital for the Criminally Insane, which is in reality a front for Pickman—a place to dispose of the project's "mistakes." Six years pass, and Daniel begins having trouble remembering if his old life was real or just another feverish dream. The days pass slowly, until the night when an electrical storm cripples the hospital's security system, opening the cells. Daniel and his unstable friend Leo take this opportunity to escape, embarking on a quest to uncover the events of their past.

While the plot is new, the gameplay closely resembles the original *Manhunt*, as does the gritty digital video look of the graphics. As before, stealth

is key to success, and staying alive is more matter of wits and misdirection than brawn. A meter shows when you are covered in shadow and safe from discovery, allowing you to distract guards by tapping on walls or throwing small objects (this time, you can even chuck a decapitated head for extra emphasis). After that, it's a matter of sneaking behind your prey and performing one of three levels of executions. Of course, there are new, even more gruesome executions this time around, and some new weapons like syringes and pens ripe for the jabbing. Rockstar has also added environmental executions for times when you don't have a weapon in your inventory. For example, we saw Lamb use a simple desk phone to strangle a man to death. Unfortunately, no details were given about how the Wii version will play, but you can use your imagination.

Rockstar has opened up other areas of the gameplay as well, especially exploration. You can now climb up and down, allowing you to access higher or lower areas as in *The Warriors*. You can also crawl through tight corridors or vents. One other intriguing addition we noted was the ability to cloak the sound of your movements under noises made by NPCs. In one instance, we were able to smash a brothel window without alerting the guards by timing it perfectly with the groans of a man getting a particularly strenuous lap dance (the game is rated M, by the way).

Although our time with the game was brief, our first impressions of *Manhunt 2* were extremely positive. If anything, this sequel's relationship with violence is even more complex, forcing us to look at why we're so drawn to horror and gore. Lamb is a more reluctant murderer than Cash; after his first kill you'll see him throw up in shame. While it will likely be a rough ride for the weak of stomach, *Manhunt 2* looks to be a strong entry in a unique series. ■ ■ ■

■ Syringes are one of the new single-use weapons

■ You'll have access to guns much earlier in the game than in the first *Manhunt*

■ Sticking to the shadows is key to survival

■ There are new types of executions, including some that use environmental objects instead of weapons

■ New abilities include climbing over walls and crawling

■ As before, combat with groups of enemies is to be avoided at all costs

■ Unlike James Earl Cash, Daniel Lamb is a reluctant killer



■ Players can alter facial expressions, wave, and smack each other using the Sixaxis

PLAYSTATION 3

LittleBigPlanet

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** MEDIA MOLECULE > **RELEASE** EARLY 2008

SACK OF FUN

Sony's only new game revelation coming out of the recent Game Developers Conference, LittleBigPlanet, supported its renewed focus on community, which was spearheaded by the announcement of Home (see page 16). The game comes courtesy of Media Molecule, a new company founded by the team that made indie hit Ragdoll Kung Fu. In LBP, users will create custom stages using a streamlined level editor and upload them to the PlayStation Network, where other users can play and rate them.

Players start out with a cutesy character (dubbed "sack-boy" by the developers) and can browse through a simple interface to select objects to place in the environment. The editing menu is tethered to your character by some kind of neon rope, and after you decide on a size and shape you can drop the item anywhere you like. In the demo at Sony's GDC keynote, the developers produced a simple wooden block, attached a metal cog to the front of it, and began running atop the spinning gear to show how the physics are instantly implemented. Players can also make stickers out of any image file on the PS3 hard drive and slap them on any surface whether it be hard, soft, textured — even a flowing piece of cloth.

After demonstrating the creation system, Media Molecule proceeded to play through a fully completed level with four players.

Characters had a variety of costumes ranging from an Evil Knievel daredevil jumpsuit to a Chinese dragon headdress.

In the garden-themed level, players had to work together to clear physics-based puzzles but also competed to collect the most yellow sponges. The motley crew navigated seesaws, clambered through a pile of burlap sacks, and grabbed onto a giant spinning gear to fling themselves over a high wall. At one point, they came across a soccer ball too big to jump over and demonstrated three different methods for getting past it. One character rolled an orange over and used it as an extra platform to jump up. Another character pushed the soccer ball forward, grabbed onto the side of it while it was moving, and used the momentum to fling himself over the top of it. The last sackboy used a similar, yet more difficult, tactic on a smaller orange to launch himself completely over the soccer ball. Next, they all nabbed some



jetpacks, snapped up a heavy shell, and dropped it onto a lever to open a door. The icing on the cake was when the four of them jumped onto one large skateboard and caught some big air off a steep ramp.

Players can publish created levels such as this and keep track of comments left by other users, play counts, and rankings. If you'd like to check out what other people are making, you'll be able to search content by user rankings, tag words, and length of time the level has been posted. Users who like each other's work can also be team up on created stages if they choose.

Let your creative juices flow this fall when a demo of LittleBigPlanet appears on the PlayStation Network, and watch for the full boxed version in early 2008. ■ ■ ■



■ Snapshots can be taken at any time during gameplay



■ Sony used The Go! Team's "Get It Together" as backing music for the demo

"DILEMMA" DOESN'T BEGIN TO DESCRIBE IT.

MASS EFFECT

Saren's forces are spreading. And their goal is clear: the extermination of all organic life. How do you decide who to save? Who to let perish? Life and death decisions await at every stop as you steer a universe of over 32 stars and planets. Don't forget your map. xbox.com/masseffect

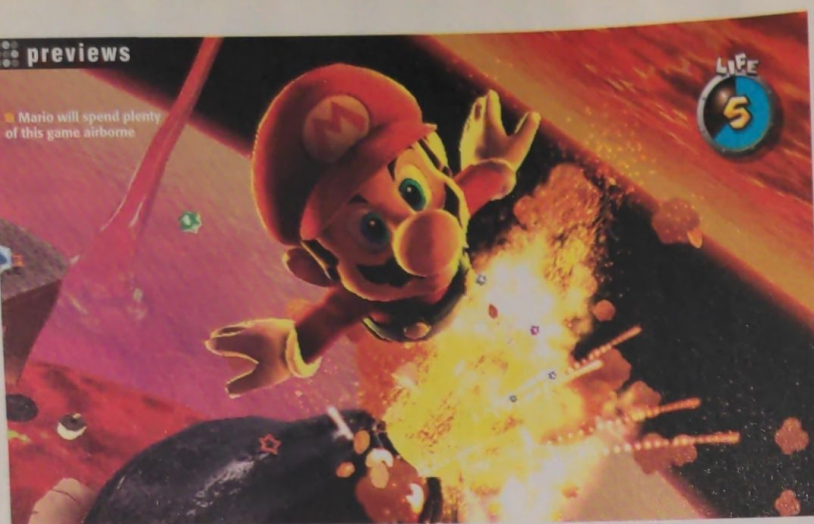
Microsoft game studio **BIOWARE**

RATING PENDING
RP
Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

Jump in

XBOX 360 LIVE

Mario will spend plenty of this game airborne



Wii

Super Mario Galaxy

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE 2007

GLOBE TROTTING

At the recent Game Developers Conference, Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto spoke primarily about his game design philosophy. But those present also caught a fresh glimpse of a crucial title in this year's Wii lineup: Super Mario Galaxy.

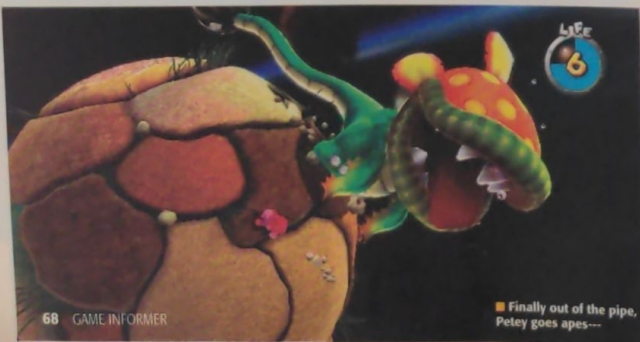
Before presenting an all-new trailer for the title, Miyamoto addressed the question of what actually happened to Mario 128, a game that was only shown in video form back in 2000. In this old clip, exactly 128 Marios scammed around on a giant circular platform and tossed blocks (and each other) off of the edge into a bottomless pit. During Miyamoto's GDC speech, he explained that Mario 128 was only a concept meant to show off the GameCube's power. But that doesn't mean he didn't store away some of the ideas for later. Miyamoto cited Pikmin as the way he was

able to incorporate a multitude of creatures into gameplay, and he's now using Super Mario Galaxy to realize the concept of navigating spherical environments.

The following trailer showed off a number of varied environments hovering in outer space. Smaller platforms resembled asteroids, grassy rocks, koopa shells, Yoshi eggs, carved wooden handles, UFOs, thick chunks of glass and metal, and a tube of platforms held together by cosmic energy. We even caught a glimpse of several airships straight out of Super Mario Bros. 3 floating around in the background. However, several massive stretches of land hinted that Mario won't just constantly be zipping through space. A fire planet resembled more traditional plumber platforming as Mario navigated metal structures jutting out of a sea of lava and launched himself out of an erupting volcano. Several larger, atmosphere-encased worlds also appeared, with one showing Mario swimming underwater while dodging a big chomping fish.



Some self-contained planets contain underwater danger



Finally out of the pipe, Peley goes apes...



was a star-shaped springboard that sent Mario soaring like Superman. We also saw the plumber ride a growing, twisted vine and float around on a wispy flower. In one scene, Mario ran around on a red apple, stomped on a wooden peg, and a worm sprung out of the side providing a bridge to the next apple.

Enemies were relatively few in number, but a few classics did make a brief appearance, including Bullet Bills, Thwomps, Bob-ombs, and Wigglers (those angry caterpillar dudes). New baddies included bouncing blue slimes and spinning robotic tops. At one point, a dinosaur hybrid piranha plant big enough to be a boss broke out of a large egg and charged after Mario.

Super Mario Galaxy appears to be coming along nicely, but without any new playable content we'll have to reserve judgment. Who knows when Nintendo is planning on springing this inevitable blockbuster upon the gaming world? Even though "this year" could mean anywhere between now and December, we're betting that Nintendo is saving this one for the holidays. ■ ■ ■



Wii

Mortal Kombat: Armageddon

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER MIDWAY > DEVELOPER MIDWAY > RELEASE MAY

BLOOD AND DISMEMBERMENT ON THE FAMILY CONSOLE

It may be difficult to picture how something as twitch as Mortal Kombat could utilize motion-sensing controls effectively. Fortunately, we can stop wondering since Midway gave us some hands-on time with the Wii version of this fighter. Rather than trying to make every punch and kick correspond to the remote and nunchuk, the team has decided to only use motion-based moves for special attacks and Fatalities.

To prevent accidental activation of motion-based moves, players must hold down the B button during the entire span of the attack to "record" it. As you can see from the screenshots, players will direct the remote away and towards for attacks like Johnny Cage's slide kick or Scorpion's hook shot. Moving down and up will activate teleport moves, and drawing a half-circle shape in the air activates projectiles like Sub-Zero's freeze shot. Once a special is completed successfully, a subtle confirmation sound emanates from the remote speaker. Character movement and jumping

is handled by the nunchuk analog stick, and standard punches and kicks are tied to the D-pad. A new training mode encourages players to pull off a chain of specials without mistakes, and in turn helps to learn the new control scheme. The system works surprisingly well at this point, and it's quite simple to pick up and play.

Armageddon's mix and match Fatalities system is also completely motion-based. Players will push the controllers forward and pull upward to rip off an opponent's head or spread the controllers apart to dismember arms. It's especially fun to twist the controllers to perform a neck snap. Motion controls extend to the extra modes as well. The Shaolin Monks-style Konquest mode plays a lot like the main game, and the cart-based Motor Kombat utilizes Excite Truck's brand of tilt steering. All in all, Armageddon Wii looks like it could be a good way for the "mature" gamer to kick off those summer months on Nintendo's little wholesome console. ■ ■ ■



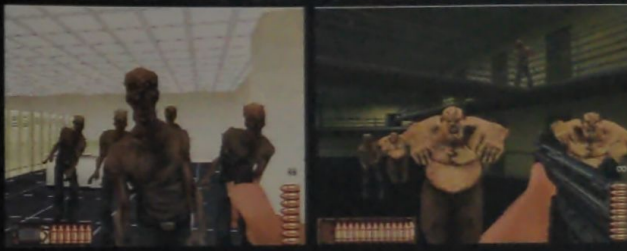
In some respects, specials are almost new

UNLIMITED ENABLED

NINTENDO DS

Touch the Dead

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER EIDOS > DEVELOPER DREAM ON STUDIOS > RELEASE MAY



REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE

We're not sure where to even start with the name of Eidos' new rail shooter, so we're going to just leave the jokes to your imagination. Even if its moniker elicits some snickers, Touch the Dead has some fun gameplay to make up for it. Combining the old school vibe of a light gun shooter with the technology afforded by the DS, Touch the Dead looks like it should deliver a unique experience when it releases this spring.

We played through the first three levels of this zombie-thon, and were impressed with some of the subtle techniques that managed to transform a simple rail shooter into a challenging action game. As an escaped prison inmate, the game opens as your cell door swings wide, and a seemingly open path to escape lies before you. It's not long before you find out where everybody has gone—they've all become zombies! Now there's a surprise. Movement is almost totally automated except for occasional branching paths that you choose by shooting in one direction or another. Weapon fire is a simple act of touching the screen where you'd like to aim, and reloading involves sweeping the stylus across from your inventory to the gun. Strategy comes in timing your reloads to match the ebb and flow of zombies that seem so intent on devouring you. There's also the need to score enough decapitations, leg losses, and arm severings in each level to boost your health before another round begins. You'll also pick up new weapons as you go, from shotguns to crowbars. While we didn't get a chance to check it out this month, the game also supports two-player cooperative play in case all those

undead are too much for you to handle all alone.

We're curious if the game continues to get more complex as the levels continue. As it is, the sections we played revealed no small amount of challenge, and the simple gameplay seemed like it should be a quality addition to the growing library of adult-oriented DS games. ■ ■ ■

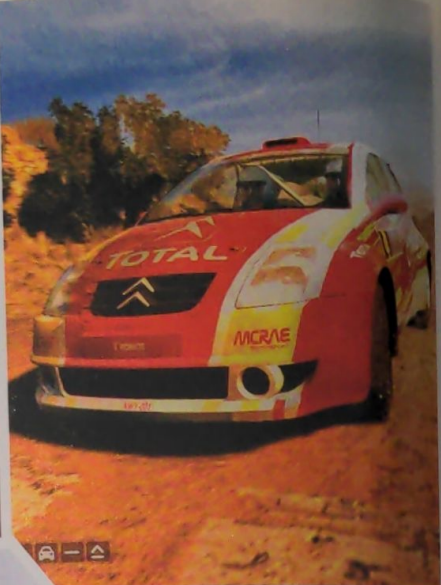


SETTING THE MOOD

A box can say a lot about a game, and the folks behind Touch the Dead wanted to make a good first impression. For their box cover, Eidos hired on Arthur Suydam, most recently popularized for his art on the Marvel Zombies comic series. We shot some questions to him about his box cover for the new game, and you can read his responses in this month's Unlimited.



■ The cockpit view is truly a thrilling experience



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

DIRT

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS3 ONLINE)
> PUBLISHER CODEMASTERS > DEVELOPER CODEMASTERS > RELEASE JUNE

PLAYING DIRTY

The Colin McRae Rally series may be on its sixth entry, with nearly 7 million units sold in Europe alone, but Codemasters is hoping that for its American audience this newest entry – simply titled *Dirt* – will be considered version one. The series, which is a monster in Europe, has failed to reach a similar status in the U.S. With the jump onto the next-gen platforms hopefully things will begin to change, and *Dirt* will be an excellent entry point for newcomers.

For those who did play it, Colin McRae was long considered the definitive rally racer. *Dirt* doesn't look like it will change that. If anything, *Dirt* will expand on what the franchise is known for. No longer is this just a point-to-point rally racer. Now you can race against up to 11 competitors in a more diverse selection of rally modes.

We got our hands on the game and saw some of the game's career pyramid of 11 tiers and 66 championship challenges

playable across five different difficulties. Add to this some time trials and a robust online mode, and *Dirt* is bound to keep even the most skilled racers busy for a while.

The first thing we noticed about *Dirt* was how good it looked. Graphically, the game is a gem. The water effects for a car as it slides around a rain-soaked corner look great. Individual blades of grass are modeled and cast a real shadow, which might just sound like technical gaming speak, but trust us: Once you whip around a corner and see the dirt clumps flying between the grass blades, you'll appreciate it.

Even with graphics this good, the thing that impressed us the most was the damage and physics systems. *Dirt* uses what Codemaster's called soft models on their cars, so damage is calculated in real time



■ The slow-mo in replays has to be seen. We'll give you a hint why: It's awesome

and applied to the car's model instead of just rotating through damage models like some games. The results are apparent. You could crash into a pole ten times and slight variations in speed and angle would result in ten different car damage looks.

The damage system has a direct impact on how you race. You can actually feel the wheels pulling you in different directions if your axle is bent. Of course, we really had

to try to damage our car since we are such natural racers... alright, we rolled within the first lap. The difficulty you are on will change how much the damage affects your performance. In the amateur difficulty, car damage will hardly change the car's handling, but while playing pro, real-world rules apply. We're pretty excited to get our hands on the finished version of this game; thankfully June is just around the corner. ■ ■ ■



Mass Effect

> STYLE 3-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > DEVELOPER BIONWARE > RELEASE SUMMER

IT'S NOT JUST FOR PHYSICS ANYMORE

After discovering a long-lost piece of alien technology on Mars, humanity was thrust into the spotlight, attracting the attention of alien races from hundreds of planets. Now that humans have advanced their civilization by using the artifact, they are ready to take a more active role in the intergalactic scene. This is how players come to control Commander Shepard, the protagonist of *Mass Effect* and the only human ever to have a shot at joining the elite force of peace-keepers called Specter.

Like BioWare's past titles, morality will play an important role in *Mass Effect*, though not in a stereotypical battle between good and evil. Players shape Shepard's personality through his actions, but those situations won't give rise to diametrical options like "Help the widow" versus "Poison the widow's only surviving son." Instead, you will decide which lines Shepard is or isn't willing to cross when the safety of the universe is on the line. Is it acceptable to threaten or injure someone with crucial information, or is a more friendly solution possible? This is what has led to Shepard being referred to by BioWare as "Jack Bauer in space." In the same way

the hero of 24 will bend the rules for the greater good, players may have to use some questionable methods of persuasion to get the job done.

Even though interacting with other creatures comes with the territory, Shepard and his crew aren't a bunch of nancy-pants diplomats. The majority of *Mass Effect*'s gameplay will be strategic gunplay mixing the combat styles of turn-based RPGs (like *Knights of the Old Republic*) and tactical shooters (like *Full Spectrum Warrior*). The battles can be fluid if you prefer a more action-oriented approach, or you can pause the game, giving you time to issue commands and catch your breath. Regardless of which method you choose, the array of customizable skills, weapons, and armor should ensure that the formula stays fresh as you explore the hundreds of available planets.

Mass Effect is unquestionably one of the heavy hitters in the Xbox 360 lineup, and every new bit of information reinforces that fact. With the game drawing close to release, players will soon find themselves in a pivotal role, shaping how humans will be perceived by other beings throughout the cosmos. ■ ■ ■



THE GOOD SHEPARD

While Commander Shepard may look the same in these screens, BioWare continues to emphasize that the character will be customizable in many ways. In addition to choosing Shepard's gender, you will be able to select one of six classes at the outset, ranging from the gun-oriented Soldier class to the Adept – a caster that uses abilities similar to Force powers. Players can also assign a backstory to the Commander that will have ripples later in the game. We still haven't seen much in terms of altering Shepard's physical appearance, but in light of the impressive depth of the gameplay options, this cosmetic angle will just be a nice perk.



■ Players can have Shepard develop a romance with certain characters. We bet the armor-clad alien dude has an oh-so-tender embrace



■ Even though combat is real-time, Mass Effect won't have twitchy gunplay

PLAYSTATION 3

Final Fantasy Versus XIII

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX > DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX > RELEASE 2008

NAME RECOGNITION

When anticipation for a game climbs, it's usually because new screens, information, or concepts have been explained, thus giving gamers an idea what to look forward to. Final Fantasy Versus XIII doesn't need to bother with that - the mere fact that this game exists is enough to get anyone excited.

Carrying the Final Fantasy name and being developed by the team responsible for Kingdom Hearts, Versus XIII will be a companion game to Final Fantasy XIII. They are set in the same universe, but they tell two distinct stories in different ways. Versus XIII will focus on darker themes, and rely on action-based gameplay.

In terms of concrete information, Square Enix is keeping quiet, but there is still plenty of room for speculation. Our guess is that the main boss will be somewhat androgynous, and one or more of the characters could have spiky hair. This is also a high probability the clothing will have zippers in improbable or impractical locations, and that swords will be a large part of the gameplay. You heard it here first! ■■■



PLAYSTATION 3

Final Fantasy XIII

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX > DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX > RELEASE 2008

LIGHTNING, CLOUD, AND SQUALL

It may seem a little early to start talking about Final Fantasy XIII, especially since plenty of gamers still have their hands full with Yazmat and Zodiark in FF XII. Even so, tidbits have started trickling out regarding the next entry in this powerhouse franchise.

Set in a divided land, tensions are running high between the inhabitants of a lower world and an upper world - a theme that should be familiar to Final Fantasy fans. The protagonist, a woman named Lightning, is believed to be an instrumental force of change, though whether she is a destroyer or unifier remains to be seen. What we do know is that she uses a combination of high technology and magic to become an incredibly powerful warrior.

Following the example set by Final Fantasy XII, Square Enix has confirmed that the battles in FF XIII will once again happen in real-time. It seems like the random encounters

of years past are now gone for good. However, some things will never change; summoned monsters are returning, and fans that missed certain classic creatures in FF XII will be happy to know that Shiva is among them. The summons will be useful beyond just showing up for a one-off attack. For instance, Shiva has the ability to transform into a motorcycle, which suggests that she may play a large role outside of battle as well. If Bahamut transforms into a Segway, this could be the best game ever.

Due to its enormous popularity, every time a new detail about Final Fantasy is revealed, it is scrutinized several times over. The series hasn't let us down yet (no, not even with FF VIII. 'Stuff it, haters!'), and it hasn't been revealed how these aspects will combine and interact with the game's other elements. It's just too bad that we'll have to wait until next year before all our questions are answered. ■■■



What's the purpose of a pygmy Chihuahua?

I'm an accessory. Like a chic handbag, a vintage necklace, or...

A pair of socks?

No, not a pair of socks. I would think you'd understand, being so stylized yourself.

Hold up there, Napoleon. I'm more than stylish. I'm also crazy versatile.

elementandfriends.com

I'm versatile, too. I can wear a funny hat or a little leather jacket.



The perch is a sweet new move available to Lara, letting her balance on tiny jump points like this pillar.



Lara enters the world of wall running.

PLAYSTATION 2

Tomb Raider: Anniversary

STRIKE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER: EIDOS > DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS > RELEASE: JUNE

THE RIGHT WAY TO REMAKE

New details continue to emerge about Eidos' upcoming remake of the original Tomb Raider, and everything we hear indicates that the game is on track to deliver exactly what most fans want—a faithful adaptation of the story and situations of the original, with brand new puzzles, fights, and graphics that have more in common with the recent Tomb Raider: Legend. This month we got a detailed look at the third major area of the game: Egypt.

Familiar locales within these levels remain almost entirely the same. Nostalgic players will recall puzzling over the Cat Temple, the Obelisk, and the imposing form of the Giant Sphinx. In each of these locations, you'll encounter familiar objectives from the original in order to progress. If you needed to pull the switch above a particular gate, you may still need to do that. However, the path to that switch has been completely redesigned to take advantage of Lara's newer move set and the physics-based environmental interactions that made

The original...



...and the remake. Notice a difference?



Legend's brain teasers so interesting.

Level design is now significantly less linear, with more paths to a given objective than before. Fans may also be surprised to find themselves in a number of outdoor locations that they previously remembered as caves. In fact, all of the "new" outdoor locations are exactly as they were originally meant to be—but most players of the original assumed that the game was almost entirely underground due to the muted gray and black "ceilings" on the original PlayStation. With those draw distance limitations lifted, players can look up into the sky and spy distant features across a giant open space. From crocodiles to cat mummies, all the enemies have received their own upgrades, enabling complex AI and shifting attack behaviors. From a technical side, the 200 polygons mummies of the original game now dock in at 3,300 polygons.

Lara's acrobatic and combat repertoire continues to expand to meet the new challenges facing her. The coolest new move we saw this month was the perch, which allowed Lara to hop between the tiny tops of pillars and balance there. The grappling hook mechanic from Legend now also allows her to attach to points on a wall, then push off and run the length of the vertical surface. Finally, a new adrenaline system promises to spice up combat by allowing for special dodging counters when an enemy attacks. With a comedy timed button press, Lara will leap to the side and fire off a one hit kill at close range, offering a more elegant approach to combat than the fast pistol firing previously required.

The more we see of Anniversary, the more we find ourselves wishing that the game was making its way to next-gen systems. But wishing doesn't make it so, and we'll have to content ourselves with a PlayStation 2 exclusive for the time being. In the meantime, that version looks plenty beautiful on its own—a point gamers will be able to determine for themselves soon. Tomb Raider Anniversary is slated for release this June. ■■■



Transforming into big old Mario is a great way to stand up an experiment.



PREVIEWS

152 Playing an ancient battle you never like this page



Super Paper Mario

STRIKE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER: NINTENDO > DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS > RELEASE: APRIL 9

PLUMBING FROM A NEW ANGLE

When Super Paper Mario was quietly announced at E3 last year, details were sparse. It was listed as a GameCube title at the time, and was nowhere to be seen on the show floor. Fortunately, Mario has changed teams over to the Wii just like that other Nintendo game with the guy in green tights. We played through several early stages of this 2D/3D platformer/RPG to find out just what this genre-bending game is all about.

SPM begins with Peach getting hypnotized into marrying Bowser by the evil Count Bleck. [WTF?—Ed.] This unholy union, combined with a forbidden book called the Dark Prophecy, creates a dark rift that threatens the world. After at least half an hour of nonstop dialogue scrolling across the screen, players can finally control Mario and get rolling.

The primary goal of the game is to collect eight "pure hearts" to fight off Bleck and his minions. All of the worlds are connected to a hub town called Flipside. Here players can interact with bovy citizens, purchase items from shops, and craft new recipes at

the bakery. Worlds are split into four stages (like 1-1, 1-2, etc.) and appear to be based around standard platforming at first glance, but soon players gain the ability to flip the level into 3D. This adds an entirely new dimension to the gameplay, revealing hidden pipes, secret paths, and concealed items. Instead of zooming through stages like they may have done in New Super Mario Bros., players will have to take a more deliberate pace in order not to miss crucial pieces of a puzzle or the game's loads of secrets.

Just because the game is more action-based this time around doesn't mean that fans of the series will be robbed of RPG elements. Every time you jump on an enemy, damage points will appear above his head and kills will add to your total experience. If you kick a koopa shell you can even earn experience multipliers if it docks several enemies in a row. Items found in question mark boxes and other out of the way places will give Mario various advantages in battle, and most utilize the Wii remote in interesting ways. The five power-up has to



be charged by shaking the controller and will target and try every enemy in Mario's direct line of sight. Other power-up charges include contextual button pressing and drawing circles around several targets.

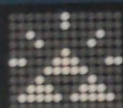
Mario won't be the only character you'll control on this adventure. Peach and Bowser will eventually join the cause and offer a nice change of pace. Though neither of them can flip to 3D, Peach has the ability to float over large chasms and Bowser uses his trademark flame breath. Mario also enlists familiars called Pals to perform offensive, defensive, and puzzle-solving maneuvers. Tippi, a butterfly-shaped sprite, will serve as

the silent plumber's voice and also provide information about most anything onscreen. Players simply switch from holding the Wii remote NES-style (as the game is predominantly played) to pointing it at whatever they want to know about. Other Pals allow Mario to grab and toss objects and enemies, set bombs, or become extremely skinny to slip through narrow passages.

This promising title will already be in stores by the time you read this, so be sure to check out Game Informer Online for our full review. ■■■



This guy is as harmless as a kitten in 3D mode



PHOTOPHILE

Mini Previews With Big Pictures

XBOX 360 | PC

Sacred 2: Fallen Angel

The original Sacred managed to scare up some buzz among the Diablo hack n' slash set in 2004. Now developer Ascaron is hoping to gain even more ground with the sequel as it moves to full 3D. Players will choose from six character types including the winged Seraphim shown here. Most of the characters have a light or shadow path and their own 30-hour quest. Friends can team up for two-player co-op on one Xbox 360 or bring it up to four over Xbox Live. Those who prefer competition can duke it out in the PVP or PVE arena mode in hopes of nabbing a prime leaderboard slot. Ascaron is shooting for an early 2006 release and expects to announce a publisher soon.

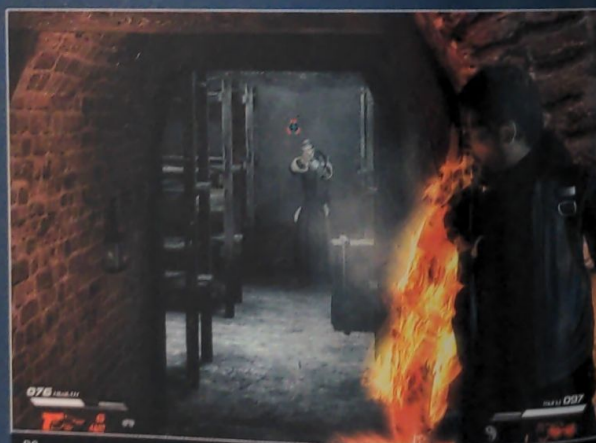


NINTENDO DS

Jam Sessions

Stop pretending you are a guitar hero and actually become one. Ubisoft is bringing over Plato's Japanese title Hiite Utaeru DS Guitar M-06 this June as Jam Sessions. The game turns your DS into a virtual guitar, letting you strum on the touch screen and activate one of seven chords using the d-pad and left shoulder button. Different chords can be mapped however you want them, and guitar effects can be added as well. Ubisoft says that a selection of songs and their chords will be included in the game (along with a tutorial), but the beauty of Jam Sessions is that you can make up your own songs however you like.

78 GAME INFORMER



PC

Infernal

Anyone remember In Nomine, the Steve Jackson pen & paper RPG that had players fighting a secret war on Earth between the forces of Heaven and Hell? No? Well, it was never very popular - the setting was crazy awesome, but the rule system made though, that Infernal has a similar (and similarly sweet-sounding) setting, which has players controlling a fallen angel working for Satan. The gun-slinging gameplay is fairly standard third-person action fare, but some special demonic powers spice up the shooting and allow for some interesting puzzles. Look for this to hit a PC near you on May 8, courtesy of Eidos and developer Playlogic.



XBOX 360 | PC

Call of Juarez

Originally scheduled to ship for PC last fall, Ubisoft delayed the U.S. release of Call of Juarez to its current summer release date. Recently, the publisher announced that the game will also ship in Xbox 360 and DirectX 10 for Windows Vista flavors as well. Aside from being entertaining to say ("Juarez" just rolls off the tongue!), Call of Juarez also offers entertainment in the form of playing two characters - one hunting the other - on their linked path through the Wild West. The FPS action looks like you'd expect, with the exception of the hunted character's use of a whip to navigate portions of the environment and the hunter's ability to independently control his two pistols at the same time. The suspense-filled story, however, is the game's biggest selling point - and we can't speak to that until we have the full version in our hands.

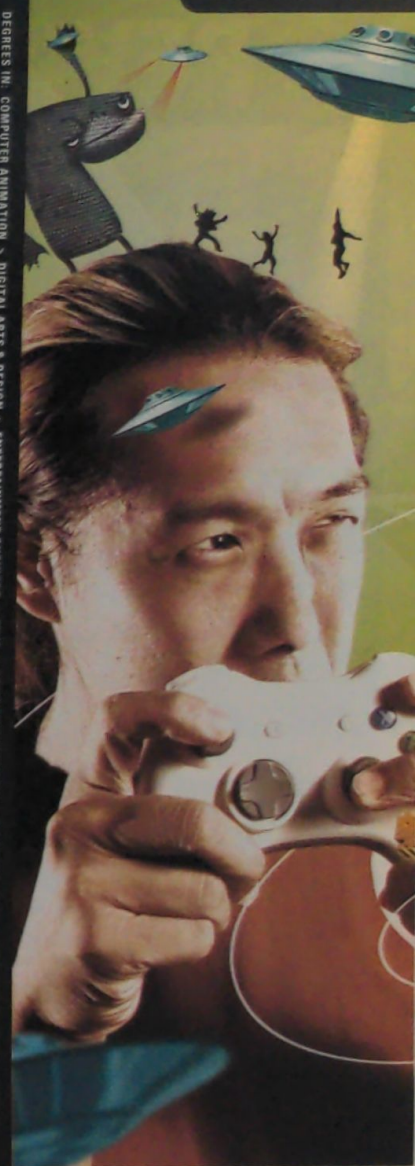


PLAYSTATION 3

SingStar

Even as Sony is pumping their latest SingStar PS2 game out to market, (see this month's review on page 86), it's already busy hyping the upcoming PS3 version of its popular karaoke game. Tapping into the online capabilities of the PS3, aspiring singers will be able to download an array of new songs/videos in addition to the approximately 30 songs that will ship on the disc. Of course, these songs won't be free, but they should offer a fun way to expand the content of the game. Uploads are an equally fun addition, since you'll be able to post your videos and (groan) audio clips for the rest of the world to enjoy. The trademarked "SingStore" will be organized so you can explore your favorite genre and albums, and will also allow viewing of preview clips before you buy. Europe will get to start singing as soon as June, but it looks as if U.S. gamers won't be able to take to the stage until sometime this fall.

DEGREES IN: COMPUTER ANIMATION > DIGITAL ARTS & DESIGN > ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS > FILM > GAME DEVELOPMENT > RECORDING ARTS > SHOW PRODUCTION & TOURING



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REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

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HANDHELD



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Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

The Ghosts are back, and this time the stakes are raised higher than ever before. Mexican revolutionaries are amassing on the U.S. border, and these gun-toting rebels aren't backing down from a clash with the U.S. military. Combining its amazing single-player campaign with another stellar multiplayer offering, Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter once again proves its worth as a tactical shooter.

90

Our crack (or crackhead, we can never decide which) review team rates games in a number of categories to help you sort out the great from the stuff you'll hate. Most games are reviewed by two staff members, and you will find both their opinions on each review. To make things a little easier we have put together some definitions of what the numbers mean, what we look for in a game, and also a cheat sheet so the newbies can understand our advanced video game jargon. It is important to note that the Game of the Month is determined only by the main review score, not an average of the two opinions.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

- Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
- Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
- Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
- Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
- Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
- Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
- Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
- Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
- Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
- Admiral Ackbar. It's a trap!

- > Concept:** What new ideas the game brings to the table and how well old ideas are presented.
- > Graphics:** How good a game looks, taking into account any flaws such as bad collision or pop-up.
- > Sound:** Does the game's music and sound effects get you involved or do they make you resolve to always play with the volume down?
- > Playability:** Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.
- > Entertainment:** Flat out, just how fun the game is to play. The most important factor in rating a game.
- > Replay Value**
 - High** - You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.
 - Moderately High** - Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.
 - Moderate** - Good for a few months or a few times through.
 - Moderately Low** - After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.
 - Low** - You'll quit playing before you complete the game.



92



Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars

Nothing says "stfu noob" like a grip of Mammoth Tanks barreling through your opponent's base. Well, actually, an Ion Cannon blast to the heart of your enemy's infrastructure is a pretty good way to serve up a big steaming cup of "stfu." And, now that we think about it, reanimating the husks of fallen Avatar walkers with engineers and using them to literally rip apart the enemy's tank brigade gets across the fact that your opponent is, in fact, a little "nublet" who needs to "l2p." All this and more awaits you in Command & Conquer 3.

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older.		Content suitable for persons 17 and older.
	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.		Product is awaiting final rating.
	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older.		

For our newer readers, here is a glossary of terms and acronyms that commonly appear in the magazine. Video game veterans should move along (these aren't the droids you are looking for).

- 1080i** - A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The "i" means that the video is being interlaced.
- 480p** - Progressive scanning, this option ("p"=progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture. 480p (i=interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting.
- 720p** - A resolution specification used for HDTV. 720p stands for resolution of 1280x720 pixels. The "p" means that the video is in progressive format.
- action** - A term we use for games like Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe.
- ad hoc** - A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity.
- adventure** - A term we use for games like Myst and Escape From Monkey Island.
- AI** - Artificial Intelligence. Usually used to refer to how well the computer reacts to a human opponent.
- bloom** - An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces.
- board** - A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mario Party.
- cel shading** - A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels.
- E3** - Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games.
- fat cosplay** - For your own good, never enter this term into an Internet image search.
- fighting** - A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive.
- first-party** - A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system.
- FMV** - Full Motion Video. Usually refers to an animated CG cutscene.
- FPS** - Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty.
- framerate** - The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement.
- frontend** - A game's menus and options.
- GBA** - Game Boy Advance.
- GC** - GameCube.
- HDTV** - High Definition Television.
- infrastructure** - A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances.
- isometric** - Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance.
- ISP** - Internet Service Provider. The company that provides you with access to the Internet.
- jaggies** - Graphical lines that are jagged when they should be straight.
- LAN** - Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay.
- MMO** - Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft.
- motion blur** - Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed.
- normal mapping** - A graphical technique in which a texture skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-poly model.
- NPC** - Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans.
- particle effects** - Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time.
- platform** - A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot.
- pop-up** - When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance.
- PS2** - Sony PlayStation 2.
- puzzle** - A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Pop.
- racing** - A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart.
- RPG** - Role-Playing Game. A game that involves character improvement through collecting and spending points. A term we use for games like Final Fantasy and Menzaigi.
- shooter** - A term we use for games like Halo and Call of Duty.
- sports** - A term we use for games like Madden NFL.
- strategy** - A term we use for games like X-Com and Front Mission.
- third-party** - Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer.

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XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2 | GAMECUBE

TMNT

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > PUBLISHER UBISOFT
> DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB E10+

NOW WITH 100% LESS COWABUNGA

As licensed games based on kid-targeted properties go, I could use a few more games like TMNT. By using the game engine behind Prince of Persia, Ubisoft sacrificed the possibility of four-player cooperative play and instead got some sweet platforming out of the deal. The result is the best Turtles game in years, which admittedly is kind of like saying you just got the best punch in the gut you've had in years. Nonetheless, TMNT entertains pretty consistently, delivering fast-paced thrills but almost no genuine challenge.

Whether jumping from rooftop to rooftop or throwing down with the Foot, there's a speed and excitement to Ubisoft's inaugural run at the Turtles that is as fun as it is frantic. The lack of puzzles or complexity in the platforming has one big benefit — there's a constant drive of forward movement that fits these ninja warriors like a glove. While it's definitely a bummer that you'll never be able to plug in and play co-op with a friend, players do eventually gain the ability to switch between the different brothers to take advantage of some unique skills, such as Michelangelo's nunchuck copter. At other times, you can tag in one of the other warriors with a quick button press, who will jump up to help fling you past wide gaps, reach high ledges, or take out a bunch of enemies at once. Each character also has his own combat and move set, and the animation and art on each of the heroes is one of the game highlights. There's a strange separation between the excellent

character art and animation on the turtles and the occasionally sloppy environments, but the level design is straightforward and zips by so fast that you might not notice.

Combat suffers under the yoke of too many enemies with too little intelligence. I know there's a perception that this style of combat is fun for younger gamers, but it's hard for me to believe anybody really prefers endless waves of the same enemy over more complex interactions. The boss fights aren't much better, where without fail you're up against some monster who repeats the same attack over and over. At least the Turtles look pretty sweet as they're taking out the baddies, and even if the fights aren't stellar they're always over pretty quick.

A nice variety of levels, some of the trademark Turtles humor, and a story that defies expectation (and credulity) round out the main game. A number of unlockable extras include some amusing videos as well as VR style challenge maps for a little added action. Through it all, the folks at Ubisoft Montreal get across the action and speed that has always made these characters fun. Because of that, even though the levels are ridiculously easy, I think even more experienced gamers could enjoy themselves as I did. TMNT is about as simple as they come, but then again, so was Vanilla Ice's "Ninja Rap," and you remember how the world ate that one up. —MILLER



The Foot Ninja are back, minus Shredder

theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

The different versions offer a very similar experience. Not surprisingly, the 360 is the place to go for graphical superiority, not to mention 1,000 of the easiest Achievement Points around. The Wii iteration plays just fine, with some very simple back and forth motions on the remote to replace your normal attack button — but if you really want to look like a ninja, I guess that's the way to go. You have fun with that.



Platforming is extremely fast, and the highlight of the game

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: Zip through the rooftops of NYC in a re-launch of one of the most popular kids' licenses in history

> Graphics: Great art and animation, particularly on the heroes, but the environments are a little bland

> Sound: Seriously, Raphael, if you say "Here's Johnny!" one more time, I'm going to throw you off this building

> Playability: When you make controls this simple and straightforward, it almost takes some of the fun away

> Entertainment: Fun platforming for several hours, but lacking the barest hint of a real challenge — and where's my four-player co-op!

> Replay Value: Moderately Low



Partner moves are about as close as you'll get to seeing multiple characters onscreen at once



Each character has their own unique special move

Second Opinion 6.75

Prince of Persia and TMNT may not seem like the most likely of bedfellows, but it turns out that harrowing, cliff-hanging excitement is exactly what the pizza-munching reptilians needed. Scruming up walls and bouncing across rooftops is nothing new per se, but the speed and finesse with which these mutants accomplish these acrobatic feats is. It's platforming in fast-forward. With rock-solid controls backing these actions, TMNT could have easily been a platforming giant, but it plummets from grace through unimaginative cookie-cutter level designs. The great gameplay just doesn't have an impact when the stages bore you to death. The game even goes to great lengths to kill your sense of exploration by laying out a breadcrumb trail. The combat system only kicks your inner fanboy even harder. The tag-team moves look great, but the majority of your time is spent mindlessly pressing buttons known to man. As a child of the '90s, TMNT is in my DNA, but with sub-par releases like this, my enthusiasm continues to dwindle. —REINER

NISSAN FAIRLADY Z CUSTOM EDITION

- PRICE: IF YOU HAVE TO ASK, YOU CAN'T AFFORD IT
- 0-60: 3.9 SECONDS
- 0-100: 7.6 SPEEDING TICKETS
- TOP SPEED: TOTALLY USELESS IN MODERN SOCIETY
- TORQUE: ABSOLUTE POWER
- MISTAKE ON HAIRPIN TURN: CLEAN YOUR SHORTS
- AVERAGE TIME TO REPLACE INTAKE MANIFOLD: 11 HOURS
- PAINT: HEY, NOTHING LASTS FOREVER
- FEELING TO DRIVE: AWESOME (WITH APPREHENSION)

FORZA MOTORSPORT® 2 NISSAN FAIRLADY Z

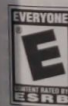
- PRICE: DRIVE ONE HOME TODAY!
- 0-60: 3.9 SECONDS
- 0-100: 7.6 SECONDS
- TOP SPEED: 190 MPH
- TORQUE: CORRUPTS ABSOLUTELY
- MISTAKE ON HAIRPIN TURN: PRESS RESTART
- AVERAGE TIME TO REPLACE INTAKE MANIFOLD: 20 SECONDS
- PAINT: INFINITE LIFETIME WARRANTY
- FEELING TO DRIVE: AWESOME (WITH EXTRA AWESOME)



FORZA2

MOTORSPORT

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Jump in.

XBOX 360 LIVE



PLAYSTATION 2 Medal of Honor: Vanguard

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER EA GAMES > RELEASE MARCH 27 > ESRB T

CASHING OUT

If Vanguard is any indication, EA is hoping that Medal of Honor has a little bit more nerd cred left that can be turned into dollars. Sure, the upcoming MoH: Airborne for next-gen consoles might revitalize this sagging series, but this entry in the franchise is a perfect example of what gaming purists hate about the EA/Activision publishing model. There is nothing at all here to recommend, unless you just can't get enough of clearing bombed-out houses of Nazis and doing the old MG-42 fish-in-a-barrel dance.

Even this decrepit design wouldn't be so bad if it came in better packaging. Unfortunately, Vanguard manages to tack crappy controls onto ancient concepts. The list of offenses in this arena is topped by the fact that your avatar stops moving when you go into the iron sights view. This basically means that you're forced to shoot from the hip in anything but a very static combat situation, and it breaks the flow of the game to pieces. A large part of what makes a first-person shooter fun and intense is the pacing, and that morose decision prevents Vanguard from building up much of either.

Though you can get used to the sub-par controls, there's still no real reason to play Vanguard, from the uninspired level design to the tired subject matter. Sure, it works on a basic level in that you shoot Nazis and they fall down. Beyond that, there isn't much here to enjoy. —ADAM



BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** "Hey, what can we do to make this World War II shooter as innovative-free as possible?"

> **Graphics:** There were PS2 games three years ago that looked better than this.

> **Sound:** Automatic weapons, squad chatter, explosions, and an orchestral score. You expected something else?

> **Playability:** Congratulations, EA, on screwing up the aiming system you tried to rip off from Call of Duty.

> **Entertainment:** It's not like it's tough to find a good World War II shooter these days. Why play this crappy one?

> **Replay Value:** Low

GENERATION GAP 4

Wii

While the PS2 version is mediocre and boring, the Wii edition of Vanguard is terrible. You have the choice of two equally horrid control methods, neither of which give anywhere near the responsiveness or sensitivity needed to make it anything but the most basic of combat situations. I'd seriously rather play with the Classic controller using the Goldeneye scheme, but that's not an option. Do not play this game on the Wii if you enjoy things that are fun.

Second Opinion 7

Vanguard doesn't stack up to the twitch play of a PC shooter, but once again it delivers a modicum of action. The usual hit detection issue included, it's clear that a new direction for the series is needed to make it more than just a Nazi shooting gallery. Up next for the franchise? We hear it's an account of the 33rd Latrine division, who faced some of the dirtiest and nastiest action of WWII. —KATO

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 Virtua Tennis 3

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER SEGA
> DEVELOPER AM3 (PS3), SUMO (XBOX 360) > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB E



I'M MAD LIKE MCENROE

I'm sure Sega fans are getting their white shorts dirty in anticipation of the series' return, but it's hard for me to understand what all the hubbub is about. When you ding so slavishly to the norm like this, you'll have to forgive me for not throwing a parade.

I like the career structure of VT 3 and how you juggle minigames, practice matches, and tournaments with needing sufficient rest to replenish your stamina. The minigames are a nice change of pace, and I like how they level up differently for your forehand and backhand. Unfortunately, even the respite of fun in the Avalanche (where you have to pick up rolling fruit while dodging giant tennis balls) and Curling minigames is not enough to bolster the flawed gameplay.

I dislike how tennis games such as this one have player movement and

shot direction on the same analog stick. This can make running in one direction and hitting the ball in the opposite direction difficult — something it's not hard to do in real-life tennis. I also found that your character will freeze when you're trying to pre-load your shot and move at the same time. Having movement on the left analog stick and a free analog swing on the right could clear this up (think Fight Night), as well as make the tennis more realistic.

Virtua Tennis 3 is a perfectly serviceable tennis game (pun intended) that fails to provide a big enough splash to make it anything else than just another tennis title. Next time I hope it won't take Sega seven years to come out with the same game. —KATO

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** I know this game has lots of Europeans you don't know, but does it have to be this anonymous?

> **Graphics:** The outscene models are really good, and the on-court animations are smooth.

> **Sound:** You can always add your own grunting if you don't like the muzak.

> **Playability:** A tennis game using both analog sticks could clear up some gameplay issues.

> **Entertainment:** Even the outrageous minigames get old, which doesn't bode well for this game.

> **Replay Value:** Moderate.

Second Opinion 8

I'm a huge tennis fan, and I've always loved Virtua Tennis. However, it pains me to note just how little progression this series has made over the years. The main career mode is — save for some slight alterations and new minigames — largely identical to that of Virtua Tennis 2. The calendar-based career rolls out painfully slowly as you methodically raise your rank and train your character. Too often, you've got nothing to do except the same old minigames over and over. Your ranking doesn't seem to account for any of the big pros you've beaten, which makes progression feel extremely arbitrary. All this said, the basic gameplay is still excellent and even more fluid thanks to the improved animation. I'll keep coming back for the great tennis action, but I can't help but think that this could have been so much more. —MATT



the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

If cruising for a partner with fuzzy balls on the Internet is your thing, then you're going to want to get the Xbox 360 version since the PS3 edition doesn't have online play. If being a voyeur is your thing, you can even watch your friends go live via VT TV! Additionally, the PS3's Sixaxis controls are about as uninspiring and worthless as you can get.

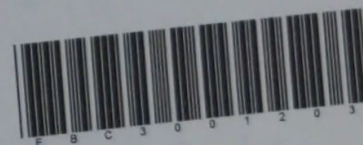


■ All the minigames are based on the real-life experiences of pros like Tim Henman

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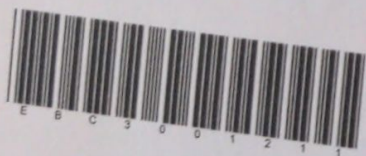
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PLAYSTATION 3

F.E.A.R.: First Encounter Assault Recon

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA > **DEVELOPER** DAY 1 STUDIOS/MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS > **RELEASE** APRIL 24 > **ESRB** M

FEAR NO EVIL

I was very excited to get a chance to play F.E.A.R., which was one of those wildly acclaimed games that I somehow avoided playing on PC and Xbox 360. Although the basis of this PS3 port (the original PC title) is now a couple years old, I'm pleased to report that F.E.A.R.'s taut gameplay can still hold its own with the best of the genre.

Since I imagine many of the people that play this on PS3, like myself, will be approaching this game for the first time, here are the basics: You are a special forces soldier tasked with tracking down Paxton Fettel, a madman who controls a battalion of genetically engineered super-soldiers with his mind. Along the way, you'll uncover a dark conspiracy involving the government, a large corporation, and a scary little girl that appears to you in visions. Of course, there's much more to this than meets the eye.

In practice, F.E.A.R. plays out as a finely tuned shooter that distinguishes itself by the copious use of slow-motion shooters à la Max Payne and fairly by-the-numbers scare tactics. The good news is that this is one of the most fun games to run and gun in that I've played in ages. While the control is dead-on, F.E.A.R. really comes alive because of its enemy AI, which is quite simply

some of the best I've ever seen. These super-soldiers are extremely canny, and will pursue, flank, and take cover with ruthless efficiency. All this makes for a single-player campaign that feels as fluid and engaging as a multiplayer bout. Thankfully, once you master the AI, there are human opponents to be had in the solid if not spectacular online component.

However, a few major flaws keep this from being a genre-busting title on par with Half-Life 2 or Halo. For one, the level designs are, at times, downright horrid. Even though almost the entire game takes place in staid industrial and office buildings, the map layouts are mind-bogglingly confusing for no apparent reason. You'll oftentimes spend as much time wandering around lost as you will shooting. Also, for all the emphasis placed on the scary aspects of this game, I didn't really feel that the plot or writing was on par with the excellently conceived pretensions, F.E.A.R. succeeds largely on good old fashioned gunplay, and I'm more than okay with that. —MATT



Graphics deliver remarkable lighting and textures, but on cooler-cutter moments that are too square and straight to draw the eye. Even so, the fights are quite a sight to behold, and that's what should bring you to this party in the first place. —MILLER

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> **Concept:** Take on hordes of genetically engineered super-soldiers and one creepy little girl.

> **Graphics:** While it features no major improvements over the Xbox 360 or PC versions, it's a nice, clean-looking FPS for PS3.

> **Sound:** I don't often knock a game for poor mixing, but some irritating sound effects were way too loud. In addition, some of the phone message audio was nearly incomprehensible.

> **Playability:** While the Sixaxis isn't the greatest for FPS, this game plays fast and furious with no major headaches.

> **Entertainment:** A damn fine shooter that doesn't totally fulfill the promise of its premise. Still, given the PS3 library right now, this is almost mandatory for action fans.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.75

With as many great shooters as there are these days, it's rare to marvel at the steps an AI will take in order to send you back to your last checkpoint. F.E.A.R. is full of those moments. And in some creepy little girls and some grisly pools of blood, and you've got a pretty tight thriller. Sadly, level design is a positive drag, but the momentum of the slow-mo fights and psych-out horror moments by running you in lazy circles of corridors. Graphics deliver remarkable lighting and textures, but on cooler-cutter moments that are too square and straight to draw the eye. Even so, the fights are quite a sight to behold, and that's what should bring you to this party in the first place. —MILLER

PLAYSTATION 3

The Godfather: The Don's Edition

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA REDWOOD SHORES > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** M



YET ANOTHER OFFER YOU CAN'T REFUSE

As long as they keep making new systems, EA is apparently dead set making sure that its game based on the legendary Godfather films makes an appearance. I've played various versions of what is largely the same game on PlayStation 2, Xbox, PSP, Xbox 360, and now the PS3. Each time I play it, I can see that some effort has been made to enhance the game. This time around, there are some new contract hits and rival strongholds to capture, made easier by a new weapons system which utilizes a selection wheel similar to that of Ratchet & Clank's. The PS3's Sixaxis controller is used to make grapple moves more visceral, as you can swing your opponents around for vicious smashes with the controller's motion sensing functions.

While this is all fine and good, it still doesn't solve the problems I have with the game as a whole, which remain largely the same. Although it's fun to see alternate perspectives on some of the movies' key events, this title really fails to deliver the

complex, emotionally resonant familial saga of the films. This is at least partially due to the absence of Al Pacino, whose portrayal of Michael Corleone was crucial to the success of the films. Perhaps it would have been better to eschew the films' sell-serious vibe altogether and try to deliver an over-the-top gangster action flick, but that's not what the developers did. If you're judging this strictly as a GTA, open-world game, it also falls short. The combat, while improved, isn't particularly compelling and neither are the sluggish driving sequences. While there are many side activities to do, these quickly become repetitive and tedious, due in large part to the fact that this city doesn't really feel alive in the way that the worlds of GTA do.

Judging by the sales figures, a lot of people have already enjoyed this game. It's quite possible that many more will on PS3, but for me The Godfather's uninspired craftsmanship falls short of being a truly compelling game experience. —MATT



You can use the Sixaxis controller for grappling

> **Concept:** The Godfather is ported to another system, with minimal enhancements.

> **Graphics:** It looks great, but graphics have never been this game's problem.

> **Sound:** The period score is effective and includes some of the iconic film music. The voice work is generally of a very high quality as well.

> **Playability:** The new weapon select wheel is a well come addition, and the targeting seems somewhat improved.

> **Entertainment:** It's got all the "bullet points" that make for an engaging open world game, but The Godfather feels unengaged and often tedious.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 7.75

The Godfather is one of my all-time favorite movies – and I heard they made a movie some time ago that was made entirely popular. Needless to say, when EA announced the video game, I was completely unimpressed. After all, I didn't need some GTA clone to make up this legendary of Mafia I remade. This PS3 game looks like the PS2 version, the look is questionable but it's not anyone's fault (the right?), and the missions are not very original, but I still had fun robbing businesses and leveling up my character through the Godfather storyline. Does this title live up to the name? Hell no. Is it decent fun for your money? Yes, sure. —BEN



PLAYSTATION 2

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES > DEVELOPER ROCKSTAR LEEDS/ROCKSTAR NORTH > RELEASE MARCH 6 > ESRB M

TOO PERFECT A PORT?

Right or wrong, I have a different standard for PS2 games than those I play on the PSP. The wide variety of excellent titles available on the PS2 combine better control options and graphical muscle to allow for a gaming experience that is a step above its handheld cousin. For that reason, it's a little hard for me to smile and nod when a game for the PSP receives what amounts to a direct port to the larger home console. While Vice City Stories has all the requisite ingredients to be a smash hit, (the most important of which is the name Grand Theft Auto in the title), the game itself falls below expectations.

Vic Vance and the story of his fall into criminality has a more serious tone than previous entries in the GTA franchise, with supporting characters that engage in spousal abuse, rampant drug use, and any number of other despicable crimes. This is by no means out of character for the series, but its treatment here has slightly less satirical edge than before – not to its benefit. With that said, there are still plenty of politically incorrect laughs to be had from the

radio DJs and the random denizens of the city.

Gameplay flows like most of the earlier GTA games, minus almost all the cool additions enacted in San Andreas. The inability to climb fences is the most noticeable absence in the control scheme, and the inflexible targeting mechanic is just as frustrating as ever. On the bright side, there are often multiple missions available at any given time, while property acquisition and management are great additions to the formula. Between upgrading your various businesses and attending to the story missions, there's a lot to keep busy with, and the game does a good job of breaking up the action so you rarely get bored with the same thing repeating

over and over.

Graphically, Vice City could certainly use some cleanup. While the PSP was able to hide some of the glaring flaws, the larger TV screen connected to your PS2 will reveal a world of muddy textures and blocky characters. Several years ago, this may have been the standard, but not anymore. Luckily, the audio production is still top notch. Some satisfying voice work from the main characters is eclipsed by the radio personalities that bring life and humor to the world. And, as always, the soundtrack is phenomenal, even if some of the tunes are a little lesser known.

One of the greatest joys of Vice City Stories lies in returning to the sun-drenched glamour of a 1980s beach city. Players of the original Vice City should get a kick out of visiting old haunts and rediscovering the city. While this latest entry is definitely a step back for the series, it still has most of the hallmarks of solid action and inappropriate behavior that have always been so much fun in the series. Even so, Vice City Stories serves as definitive evidence that it's time for something new. —MILLER



BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> Concept: Return to the '80s in this port of the PSP crime simulator

> Graphics: Poor texture work and overall quality makes this look worse than GTA should at this point

> Sound: A fantastic soundtrack and high-quality voiceovers have never been a problem for the series, and that's still true

> Playability: Easy to pick up and have fun, but the gun targeting needs an upgrade

> Entertainment: It's not even close to the best this franchise has offered, but it's still a fantastic way to indulge in a little make-believe violence

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 8.25

I'm immersed in a story about the seedier elements of the criminal underworld in a time period ripe for snarky pop cultural satire, and in a city where muzzle flashes and neon light up the night. I feel like I've come home to the greatest game from five years ago. Even the newly added empire building elements – where you acquire as well as upgrade various businesses – are a great addition that I want to see again. This entry has all of GTA's trademark writing and humor, and this series still has some of the best soundtracks out there. Of course, sometimes it's hard to come home. GTA's Achilles heels of constant pop-up and poor targeting are possibly the worst we've seen with this entry, and the big screen does nothing for these PSP graphics. Also, the lack of the RPG elements and dimmable environments remind me why I moved to San Andreas. Still, if you are a fan of the series who didn't get to play this on PSP, you might as well enjoy this appetizer before the GTA IV

PS2 QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2

Meet the Robinsons

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION
> PUBLISHER DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS
> DEVELOPER AVALANCHE SOFTWARE
> RELEASE MARCH 27 > ESRB E10+



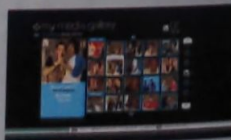
BOTTOM LINE 7

Meet the Robinsons does everything you'd expect out of a licensed game, and no more. It's a good thing, then, that our expectations of a movie-licensed product have risen so high. It uses the film's art assets to good effect, puts you in control of the main character on a quest to run around collecting stuff while completing various challenges, and has rough spots here and there. You'll collect gadgets that enable the solution to the puzzles you encounter, and contextual hurdling, leaping, and climbing takes the place of a jump button. The clumsy ripoff of Zelda gameplay will be a great time for younger folks obsessed with the movie, and a reasonably competent but entirely by-the-numbers platformer to more seasoned gamers. —ADAM

PLAYSTATION 2

Singstar Pop

> STYLE 1 TO 8-PLAYER MUSIC
> PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
EUROPE > RELEASE APRIL 3 > ESRB E10+



BOTTOM LINE 8

Nothing if not appropriately named, the second PS2 Singstar game delivers chart topers like Snow Patrol, Ashlee Simpson, U2, and 3 Doors Down right beside classic tunes from The Clash, Cyndi Lauper, and Whitney Houston. While you're probably not equipped to hit the high note in A-Ha's "Take On Me," Singstar does a good job of making you have a good time while you try, with the full videos of all the songs running in the background and amusing playback options that allow you to robotize your voice or add reverb and vibrato. The scoring system is a little iffy, but if you're playing for numbers, you may be missing the point. With a more singable and fun song list than its predecessor, this installment gives its competitor a good reason to believe the revolution a



PLAYSTATION 2

Dawn of Mana

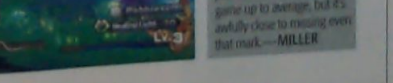
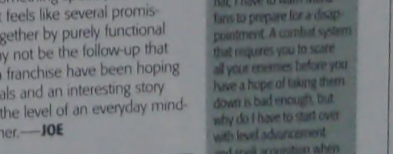
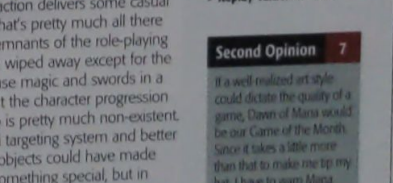
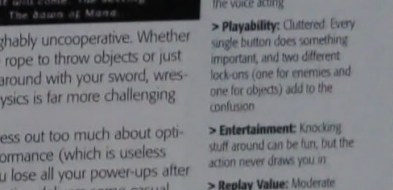
> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
> DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX > RELEASE MAY 22 > ESRB T

TAKE IT LIKE A MANA

I have a lot of fondness and respect for the Mana series. It helped define the whole action/RPG genre, and there was a time when Secret of Mana spent several consecutive months in my SNES. I wish I could say that Dawn of Mana is a return to form after years of side-stories and rehashes, but I can't. It further dilutes the Mana name with loads of mediocre combat and barely a trace of the role-playing elements that once made it popular.

The greater focus on action isn't an entirely lost cause, since the gameplay manages to integrate cool concepts beyond mashing the square button. The key is the main character's versatile weapon, which can be used as a sword, slingshot, or grappling rope. Every area is full of logs, rocks, and various exploding vegetables that can be tossed at enemies, sending them into a panic. Then you kill them. It's possible to take them out by just bullying through, but the rewards (like more power, health, and magic) are much greater if you use the environment wisely.

It may sound promising, but this emphasis on scattered junk is where Dawn of Mana hits its biggest hurdle. Sending a mixed signal, the game says it's important to use objects, but makes it difficult and frustrating to do so. The



BOTTOM LINE 7

> Concept: Mana goes 3D for the first time, but leaves its RPG luggage behind

> Graphics: The environments are pretty bland, but the characters and enemies look great and are well designed

> Sound: The music is actually good. I cannot say the same for the voice acting

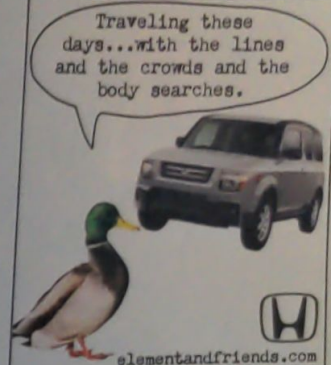
> Playability: Cluttered. Every single button does something important, and two different lock-ons (one for enemies and one for objects) add to the confusion

> Entertainment: Knocking stuff around can be fun, but the action never draws you in

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 7

If a well-realized art style could dictate the quality of a game, Dawn of Mana would be our Game of the Month. Since it takes a little more than that to make me tip my hat, I have to warn Mana fans to prepare for a disappointment. A combat system that requires you to score all your enemies before you have a hope of taking them down is bad enough, but why do I have to start over with level advancement and spell acquisition when I beat a chapter? There are a number of other poor design decisions here, from a camera panned too close to poor level layout, not to mention an awkward targeting mechanic. It's enough to make me question a studio I usually swear by. High producers values put this game up to average, but it's awfully close to missing even that mark. —MILLER



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SI model shown.



Prince of Persia: Rival Swords

Wii
 > STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL
 > RELEASE APRIL 5 > ESRB T

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Make no mistake – this is not the next-generation Prince you’ve been waiting for. In fact, it’s not a new game at all; Rival Swords is an almost exact port of Two Thrones. What is new is the way you’ll be controlling the young royal as he makes those death-defying leaps between columns and ledges. The Wii remote has been well utilized to deliver smooth gameplay, and I can’t think of any way the team could have mapped the controls better. With that said, the precision and speed of a quick button press is a much better fit for the unique style of the Prince than this alternative – a frenzied swinging of your arms that makes you look a little more like a kindergartner dancing than a badass sword-wielder.

While this is the first game for the franchise on the Wii, Rival Swords is the third game of a larger series – if you only own a Wii, you owe it to yourself to track down the first two games on GameCube so you can play them first. In this installment, those zany Sands of Time are causing trouble again, and the Prince develops something of a split personality as the sands begin to transform him into a

dark version of himself. The story leads to one of the most satisfying conclusions to a game series that I’ve encountered, as the story of all three games is tied up into a relatively perfect little bow.

I’d hazard to say that the platforming in this concluding chapter of the Prince’s saga is some of the best you’ll find, and I didn’t have any trouble adjusting to most actions on the Wii remote. Combat, on the other hand, feels pretty haphazard. The one exception to this rule is the stealth-oriented speed kills, which actually felt a little easier to pull off than before. Plus, the abrupt slashing cuts you make with the remote during those backstabbing maneuvers are strangely satisfying.

The Wii version looks zero percent better to my eye than the original release of this game, but enthusiasts of the franchise may want to take this for a spin to try out the unique controls. For myself, I believe I’ll take my future return trips to Persia sans frantic arm waving. —MILLER

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Drag the Prince onto a new system with a bevy of frantic arm swings

> **Graphics:** Basically identical to the game when it came out on current-gen systems – an amazing art style that has begun to show its age

> **Sound:** Remarkable atmospheric music and voiceovers draw you into the fantasy

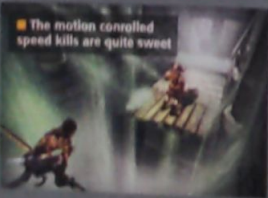
> **Playability:** Very functional and well-mapped controls for a Wii game, but it’s not as precise as using a more traditional controller

> **Entertainment:** Still an amazing story with great platforming, but where’s my brand new game?

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

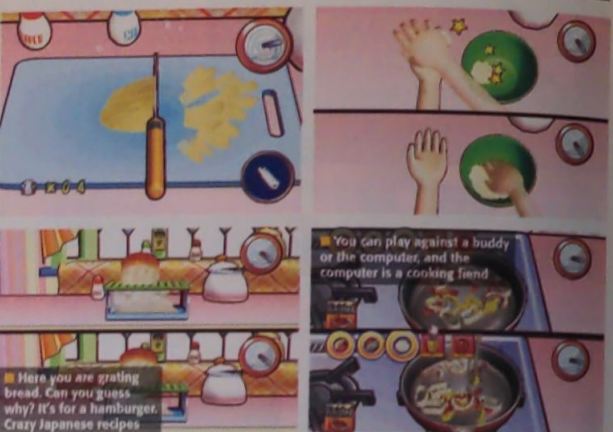
Second Opinion 8

If you thought the combat controls in Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones were too responsive and fun, their diminished quality in Rival Swords might be more up your alley. Your wild flailing is hilariously at odds with the Prince’s acrobatic grace, so only the timing-based stealth kill moments deliver the thrill of swinging a blade. The other elements that distinguished this title when it first released (a year and a half ago) are still intact, including some great platforming and an intriguing art style. Even with imprecise combat, this is still an excellent game – but the motion-sensing controls do more to deal the experience than enhance it. —JOE



Cooking Mama: Cook Off

Wii
 > STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER MAJESCO > DEVELOPER OFFICE CREATE > RELEASE MARCH 20
 > ESRB E



UNDERCOOKED

The female Japanese voice offers me a compliment after I finish chopping my meat to make beef tips in wine sauce. Every step in the recipe always has some advice to accompany it. Mama’s English isn’t perfect, but that matches the charming and playful tone of the game, and could have been intentional. It’s actually amusing. I only wish I could say the same thing about the awkward controls in Cooking Mama.

I can’t tell you how frustrating it can be to crack an egg or add the right salt to your popcorn in this game. Given time you do grow into the controls a little, but they are not the only problem this game faces. Another one is being dull. You complete recipes to unlock more recipes. Cooking an item better and getting different medals doesn’t earn you anything.

The game is a little more fun if you are playing against a friend. You can also play against the computer and earn items for your kitchen, but you only compete with recipes you have already unlocked in single-player, and the items do nothing to change the gameplay – they just sit around the kitchen.

I kind of wish Cooking Mama had used some real recipes that you could try out in your own home. I don’t know how many people would have actually done so, but it would have added a unique sense of validity to the game. As it stands now, the cartoony graphics don’t really make you hungry or even make you feel like you actually made food, nor is the game ridiculous enough to give you that silly kind of fun like WarioWare. Any future entry in this series will probably have to go one of those two ways. —BEN

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

> **Concept:** Use a bunch of awkward Wii remote gestures to make a variety of foods from around the globe

> **Graphics:** Definitely not the highlight of this game, and the cartoony visuals are bland

> **Sound:** The Japanese voiceover work is amusing, while the music is forgettable

> **Playability:** The Wii controls could definitely use some work

> **Entertainment:** Maybe fun if you are just kicking back with some friends, but the intrigue of single-player fades quickly

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.25

When the first Cooking Mama came out on DS last year, it offered amusing touch-screen minigames for a cheap \$20. The jump to Wii has resulted in a few major changes, but fans of the original should still enjoy it. The motion controls take some getting used to, but ultimately work well after practice. Taking on a friend in versus mode adds a new dimension, and I liked challenging computer-controlled “friends” from around the globe for items, even if they are cheek full of stereotypes. With a little more depth I think this series could climb out of the budget gutter. As it stands, it’s tough to recommend to those outside of the quirky Japanese foodie set. —BRYAN



Kororinpa: Marble Mania

Wii
 > STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/PUZZLE > PUBLISHER HUDSON
 > DEVELOPER HUDSON > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB E

ROLLS WITH THE BEST

With Kororinpa, Hudson has answered Nintendo’s call to create games that

anyone with hands can play and actually get pretty good at. Sure, we’ve all seen plenty of marble puzzle games in the past, and Sega already implemented Wii tilt in Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz. But the entertaining and challenging level designs, forgiving checkpoint system, and deft controls put the core game a league above recent Monkey Ball offerings.

Environments range from bustling cities to green gardens to a toy box motif. Throughout the course of the game, you’ll steer over skinny planks, conveyor belts, and slippery ice. Players can unlock up to 20 different marbles, each with their own stats and sound effects (some of which emit from the Wimote speaker). Outside of traditional marbles, skilled tilters can use balls based on animals, planets, and sports balls.

The 45 main stages won’t take much longer than an afternoon to complete, but there are over a dozen secret stages to unlock and every board has a mirrored version to master as well. Split-screen versus mode is a blast, but it sucks that you can’t play online or post your best times to a leaderboard. A level editor would have been cool as well. Too bad Nintendo doesn’t have their online structure pulled together yet.

In all, Kororinpa serves as a quick dose of fun. It just needs some more beef to keep players coming back. —BRYAN

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Roll a marble around with the Wii remote

> **Graphics:** Simple but effective for their purposes

> **Sound:** Music ranges from Celtic to old west piano, and the gassy panda ball will destroy your concentration

> **Playability:** Tilt mechanics are perfectly tuned

> **Entertainment:** Main game is short, yet enjoyable. Versus mode keeps things interesting

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 8.5

At first glance, this looks like little more than Marble Madness meets Super Monkey Ball control. That’s pretty accurate, actually. But what that description misses is the fact that this is one damn fine Wii title. It takes a surgeon’s hand to navigate the game’s dramatic shifts in perspective (I swear MC Escher was on the development team), but the accurate controls keep it from becoming frustrating. Honestly, this is just a better game than any of the Monkey Ball titles, and I sincerely hope you’ll check it out. —MATT

Wii QUICKIES

The Godfather: Blackhand Edition

Wii
 > STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION
 > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
 > DEVELOPER EA REDWOOD SHORES
 > RELEASE MARCH 28 > ESRB M



BOTTOM LINE 6.5

EA seems insistent on releasing an enhanced version of The Godfather on every new system that comes along. But at this rate, I don’t see the game reaching epic status until we see a PlayStation 3 or a Wii 3. The new weapon wheel makes firefighting less stressful, and adding more missions is never a bad thing, but the basic design of the game remains painfully dull. The uneventful stretches of driving, repetition in interrogations, and simplicity of missions has not improved. The redeveloped skill tree is a step in the right direction, but the sloppy motion-based combat and IR targeting make the game even more painful than it was on the other machines. The Wii version holds up graphically, but its ailing gameplay makes it the worst entry yet. —REINER

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07

Wii
 > STYLE 1-4-PLAYERS SPORTS
 > PUBLISHER EA SPORTS
 > DEVELOPER EA REDWOOD SHORES
 > RELEASE MARCH 15 > ESRB E



BOTTOM LINE 6.5

As Judge Smalls said in Caddyshack, “The world needs ditch diggers too.” We can’t all be Tiger, and the game has a hard time detecting your backswing. Thus, it’s harder to control. There were even times the game putted for me by accident. I do, however, like how the Wii version does away with the need for a power change button, and the practice swing function is something that should be in all Tiger games. But unfortunately for Tiger, Tecmo’s Super Swing Golf remains the best golfer on the Wii, hands down. —KATO

Wing Island

Wii
 > STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER HUDSON > DEVELOPER HUDSON
 > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB E



KEEP WAITING FOR PILOTWINGS

Can someone explain to me why a bunch of bird people would need to use planes? They’ve got freaking wings for arms! Well, I guess it would be tough to drop fire retardant, carry around logs, pop balloons, or do any of the other extremely mundane tasks in Wing Island without an airplane. Damn.

In addition to the missions mentioned above, players will drop bombs on rock formations and junked ships, throw nets on cows, speed through ring races, photograph whales and trees, and fertilize crops. Occasionally, you’ll fly a single plane and enjoy its relatively tight controls. But most of the time you’ll steer a fleet of five that just doesn’t like to cooperate. Players can switch from a V formation to a cross shape to a single file line with each trading off varying degrees of speed for maneuverability.

Wing Island’s method of pointing and twisting the remote to where you want to go simply does not allow for the kind of twitch maneuvering you need for tight corridors. For example, I relied more on luck to complete bombing runs instead of actually looking down with the analog stick, which usually results in a wall crash rather than a successful target drop.

Between missions you have to pay to get your plane repaired, which isn’t too big of a deal. Unfortunately, you only make money if you earn a medal in a mission. This means that the log drop mission you just beat after 12 tries will pay out exactly zero dollars if you won by the skin of your teeth. Way to dissuade players from spending money on new parts or planes, Hudson! I should add that there’s only one save file for the game. Why does that still happen in this day and age?

In split-screen multiplayer, one person uses a remote while the other hangs on to the nunchuk. You compete to pop the most balloons – or pop the balloons trailing behind your competitor. This is as close as it gets to dogfighting, and it could have been okay if they let you duke it out until someone runs out of balloons. But alas, every match is limited to only a couple of minutes.

To be clear, I have no problem with non-violent flight games. In fact, I loved both Pilotwings games in their day. But Wing Island went down a dark path somewhere in development and somehow killed any potential for fun along the way. —BRYAN

BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** Barf out a Wii flying game that capitalizes on our desire for the long-lost Pilotwings franchise

> **Graphics:** Extremely plain and uninspiring

> **Sound:** Forgettable music. All voices sound like this: “Bee bee bee beeeeee”

> **Playability:** Single plane controls aren’t so bad. Formation mechanics are a disaster

> **Entertainment:** Constant frustration mixed with boredom

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5.25

Some people might not like Wing Island because instead of combat flying you’ll be crop dusting and delivering cargo. Not me. I’d be fine with a fun game that is all about zipping through a chain of islands, and stomping cliffs while I complete basically mundane flight tasks. That entire description applies to Wing Island except the adjective “fun.” The subpar visuals, awkward controls, and run-of-the-mill flight physics should be enough to ground most flights, but the uninspired missions and comically far from fun flying are enough to close the airport. There’s a certain thrill in bustling and having the Wii remote like a paper airplane in your hands through the sky, but these tedious characters and their grumpy conduct a far more painful looking take-off. —MILLER



XBOX 360

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT/UBISOFT PARIS > RELEASE MARCH 8 > ESRB T

THE GHOSTS MAKE A BORDER RUN

With the U.S. President secure and the nuke in safe hands as the first episode of GRAW wraps up, you would think Lt. Scott Mitchell and his band of elite infantry would get some well-deserved R&R. But instead of going back to the drawing board after their failed coup, the Mexican revolutionaries are moving straight into their second phase of attack, amassing forces directly across the U.S. border in Juarez. With the Army still playing coy and denying any direct involvement to the build-up, your team of Ghosts must once more take on the role of international janitors to clean up the mess.

Gameplay-wise, GRAW 2 offers a fair share of minor improvements. The high dynamic range lighting gives the sand-swept cities of Mexico yet another layer of stylistic realism and immersion. The new squad selection feature adds tactical thinking to your pre-war plan. Will you choose overwhelming firepower with grenadiers and support soldiers or play it safe by taking a medic? The Cross-com is also vastly improved, as the new version allows you to view the hot zone from the eyes of your squad or support units no matter where they are on the map.

Ghost Recon has always been about great multiplayer, and GRAW 2 keeps the family name intact with a huge selection of maps (some available in night and day modes), dynamic respawn areas that prevent rampant camping, entirely customizable game modes, and a new medic system that gives you the chance to save your teammates in the heat of battle. The new clan system also deserves praise, as it allows you to select custom team names, import logos, choose your team camouflage, find clan matches, and recruit/demote clan members. I would have loved to see a ranking system like those in Battlefield 2 and Rainbow Six Vegas, but it didn't make it into this version of the game.

Ubisoft also includes six great standalone co-op missions for you to engage with your friends. This mode could have been even better if it allowed us to play the single-player campaign in co-op (once again, a feature introduced in RSV), but we're left hoping that Ubisoft offers some follow-up missions via a downloadable expansion pack.

With only one year of development and a handful of improvements to offer, the GRAW 2 single-player campaign plays more like an expansion pack than

a full-blown sequel. While it still delivers many riveting combat experiences, they aren't plentiful enough to keep the game from feeling like a step down from its cousin, Rainbow Six Vegas. Enemies still make poor decisions during firefights; when a pile of dead soldiers who have felt the wrath of my sniper rifle lie atop one another, you would think other soldiers would avoid this meat grinder. But no—they foolishly scurry from safe cover locations to join the bloody mound of fallen comrades. The cover system, while still operable, feels clunky now compared to the superior RSV offering. Maybe it's just my weak arm, but the grenade system in GRAW doesn't feel as polished as other Clancy titles. It's not uncommon for me to take out my entire squad as the grenade ricochets off a windowsill or cover point instead of landing by the intended target. It's also a pain to switch out of your primary weapon just to make a quick toss.

While GRAW 2 may have fallen behind the excellent Rainbow Six Vegas, its great multiplayer and explosive single-player storyline still make this game a tour of duty worth taking. —BERTZ

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** Keep the Mexicans at bay and out of the United States (the militants, not the immigrants)

> **Graphics:** South of the border has never looked better—before, after, and during the explosive firefights

> **Sound:** Amazing battlefield sound effects are tempered by the cheesy '80s action flick score

> **Playability:** The controls feel slightly less impressive after playing its more-polished cousin, Rainbow Six Vegas

> **Entertainment:** Come for the solid single-player, stay for the amazing multiplayer

> **Replay Value:** High



Second Opinion 9

If Ubisoft can continue pumping out GRAW and Rainbow Six sequels on a yearly basis, we might as well just change the name of Xbox 360 to the Tom Clancy Machine. With enhancements accompanying every pixel that graces the screen, GRAW 2 is another game that you could keep spinning in your system until the next sequel arrives. The single-player campaign is packed to the hilt with cinematic moments that rival the embassy bombing from the original, amazing new Cross-com functionality, and a visual presentation that will keep your jaw firmly glued to the floor. Direct hits are also fired in multiplayer. The new clan system rocks, having a medic in battle really changes the complexity of the game, and I love having day and night cycles on most of the maps. Co-op is as entertaining as ever, but sadly, it still doesn't include the campaign. GRAW 2 doesn't change the face of war, it simply gives gamers another helly-bell of one of Xbox 360's most explosive franchises. —REINER

XBOX 360

Earth Defense Force 2017

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER D3 > DEVELOPER SANDLOT > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB T



BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** 1950s science fiction cheese with a flair for next-generation visuals

> **Graphics:** Lacks creativity in its alien designs, but constantly vows with its crumbling buildings, magnificent explosions, and size of the enemies

> **Sound:** Horrible in a listenable way, but great in that classic sci-fi way

> **Playability:** Simplistic third-person controls with a nice selection of weapons, and nearly uncontrollable vehicles

> **Entertainment:** It delivers 15-plus hours of magnificent alien-abuse and the hankering to watch some classic sci-fi aftermaths

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

THEY CAME FROM SPACE

Alien invaders have descended upon Earth, and it's up to you, a faceless soldier in the Earth Defense Force, to give these unfriendly trespassers a proper rocket-to-the-face welcome. Part *War of the Worlds*, part *Godzilla*, and part *Them!*, *Earth Defense Force 2017* latches on to the monstrously farfetched camp of 1950s science-fiction cinema, and embraces the role of a B-grade cult classic with its exciting alien-splattering action, astonishing city-leveling destruction, and hilarious ear-piercing screams.

Outside of "kill them all," the game really doesn't offer up much of a narrative—this is probably a good thing, as I would hate to see a writer attempt to describe how 20-story cyborg dinosaurs, sentient robots, giant acid-spewing ants, and jumping spiders are all part of the same invasion force. The miscellany of aliens is certainly odd, but you would be surprised how well they mesh together on the field of war. As a giant lizard knocks down skyscrapers with the reckless abandon of a kid kicking a can, swarms of ants scurry through the city streets, saucers hover in the sky, and spiders bounce from rooftop to rooftop.

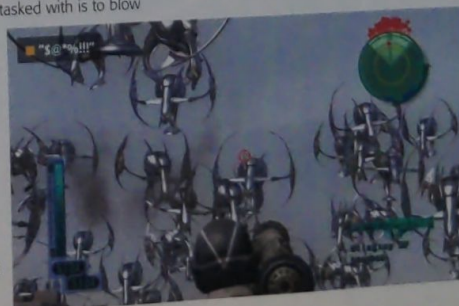
Much like the Serious Sam titles, the only goal that players are tasked with is to blow

possible. You can run, shoot, jump, and dive roll—all of which are handled exceptionally well. On certain levels you'll also have the chance to pilot a tank, helicopter, mech, and hoverbike—all of these are handled as poorly as possible.

There isn't much to it, but you really won't believe how much fun this silly action game can be. While embodying the highest level of cheese possible in its premise, the visuals are anything but low-budget. Errant missile blasts will send buildings crumbling to the ground. When a robot goes down, you are in for a real treat when you see the explosion that follows. You also can't help but hold your breath when a saucer the size of a football field plummets toward a bustling city.

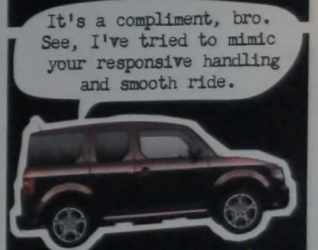
No online functionality is included, but two players can tackle the entire game through split-screen co-op. The game also boasts longevity in an array of difficulty settings. As the game gets harder, over 150 weapons become available.

Earth Defense Force may not have the serious tones of today's triple-A juggernauts, but its quality gameplay and refreshing premise shows that a B-game can be every bit as entertaining. —REINER



Second Opinion 7

Antel Robots! Spaceshies! With intergalactic horrors surrounding you on all sides, the only way to save the city is to destroy it, launching valley after valley of missiles at the enormous invaders. *Earth Defense Force* perfectly captures the simple joy of obliterating legions of bad guys. I often couldn't even see thanks to the walls of smoke, fire, and bug guts. It's too bad that this package can't offer anything more than these basic thrills; the very concept of *Earth Defense Force* coaxes capitals on it. Instead, you get arcade-style action with no frills—unless you consider serious camera and collision problems frills. The controls are spotty, but that doesn't negate the sheer entertainment of picking up a bazooka and eradicating aliens for great justice. —JOE



©2006 American Honda Motor Co., Inc. SC model shown.



■ When the battles start raging, C&C 3 looks amazing



■ The GDI kills Kane again in the campaign... or so it thinks



BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Take the storied C&C franchise to the next level, graphically, anyway

> **Graphics:** In a word, outstanding. Only the bitterest of haters could badmouth these visuals

> **Sound:** Ah, Michael Ironside, you're better in movies than in cutscenes. Beyond that, standard RTS fare

> **Playability:** Just because this is coming out on 360 doesn't mean the PC interface has to be archaic

> **Entertainment:** This is as true to its roots as any title I've ever seen—almost too much so

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.5

Like many gamers out there, I have dreamed of the return of Kane and all that he represented to me as a Command & Conquer fan. His return ends up being a bittersweet reunion, like running into an ex-girlfriend at Denny's. It's nice to see your old friend and remember the good times, but ultimately she's a bight on an otherwise great late-night feeding frenzy. The return of the old live-action cinematics in Tiberium Wars lit that description to a tee: I always thought I wanted them back, but once I saw them in action I couldn't wait for them to go away again (and no amount of super babes from *Battlestar Galactica* is going to change that). That said, the game itself is quite satisfactory. Well-designed campaigns with hours upon hours of pure Command & Conquer over-build and over-destroy gameplay are as satisfying now as they ever were. It doesn't try to change the mold; it just fills it with what we already know and love.—ANDY



PC

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars

> **STYLE:** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER:** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER:** EALA > **RELEASE:** MARCH 26 > **ESRB:** T

NEW, SHINY, AND EXACTLY THE SAME

Failing innovation, the only way for a game to be truly successful is to execute its old ideas at a high level. This is the path that EA is taking with the Command & Conquer franchise. There's nary a lick of new or unusual gameplay to be found here, but the strength of the C&C legacy and the extremely high level of polish make Tiberium Wars one of the better real-time strategy titles of recent years regardless.

The gameplay of Command & Conquer has always been fast, intense, and micromanagement-heavy. This latest entry in the series is no different; the macro-level strategy here doesn't expand on the timeless tempo dynamic that has dominated RTS play since the genre's inception. You'll counter tanks with bigger tanks or missile infantry, infantry with flamethrowers, and aircraft with SAM units or emplacements. Even the alien Scrin faction is enjoyable to play with but fails to deliver any truly innovative concepts to the genre, though it certainly spices up the classic GDI-Nod conflict and offers something beyond the familiar infantry and tanks. The tools at your disposal are the same ones that you've been

using for years. C&C 3 just makes it very easy (and very, very pretty) to use them.

A match of Tiberium Wars, with the exception of gimmicky single-player missions, is about keeping your opponent off-balance enough that you're able to bring your strategy—whether it's a tank rush, infantry zerg, or game-ending superweapon—to fruition before he can. However, though the experience is nearly identical to what you'll get out of any traditional RTS from Starcraft to Rise of Legends, the timeline is compressed in C&C 3. Building a base is so effortless that the initial setup of a match takes a mere few seconds, and the countdown until somebody gets their superweapon up and running starts right away. There isn't the opportunity for long, drawn-out matches—the Ion Cannon or its Nod and Scrin equivalents ensure that. Consequently, static defenses and turtling strategies are less effective here than in most games.

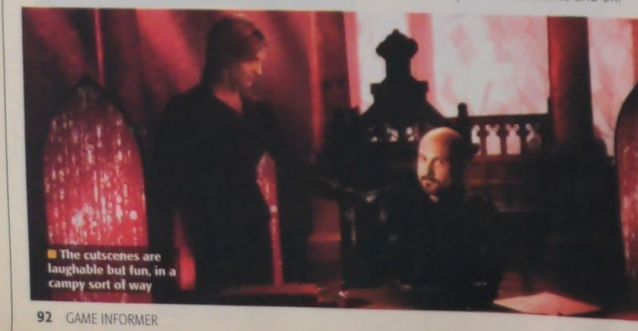
All this polish in the core gameplay wouldn't add up to much without good content for it to exist on, and C&C 3 has that in spades both online and off.

The three single-player campaigns are enormously lengthy and well-designed, offering literally dozens of hours of premium story-driven missions. The offline campaigns are so well done that this may beat out Warcraft III as my favorite single-player RTS ever, and that's no small feat. Multiplayer comes with its own set of bells and whistles, with tournament support, voicechat, observer modes, and more. It's clear that EA wants this to be "the next big thing" in RTS and has funded it accordingly. The tools are certainly there for a great community to form, should gamers embrace it.

A few minor imitations, most notably queuing up production in multiple buildings, don't do much to mar the overall experience. C&C 3 is a shining example of how fun a five-year-old design can still be if it receives enough polish and tuning.—ADAM



■ Landmarks like the Pentagon ground the setting



■ The cutscenes are laughable but fun in a campy sort of way



PC

Titan Quest: Immortal Throne

> **STYLE:** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER:** THQ > **DEVELOPER:** IRON LORE STUDIOS > **RELEASE:** MARCH 5 > **ESRB:** T

GOD OF LOOT

This really is one of those reviews that writes itself. We should all be aware by now that Titan Quest is an excellent game that does Diablo II's legacy justice. Similarly, everyone should know at this point whether or not their brain has that itch that only leveling up and collecting loot can scratch. With those two things in mind, only one issue remains: is Immortal Throne a reasonably competent expansion that adds enough replay to Titan Quest to justify its \$30 price tag? The answer, unsurprisingly, is emphatically positive.

The biggest addition is the new Dream mastery. Specializing in this fighting style provides a unique flavor to your character with its hybrid of melee and spellcasting. Dream-based characters even get access to a Nightmare pet for further domination. It's a cool way to build your hero, and worth starting over from level one to experience.

If your existing avatar is just too awesome to give up on, though, the additional content in Immortal Throne is interesting enough to load up that old save file. Why wouldn't you want to travel to Hades for the glory of the gods, see new and exotic monsters, and kill them for their undoubtedly superior drops? A convenient Caravan to store your goods and transfer them between characters is a welcome addition, and powerful Artifact recipes that have you combine specific ingredients to create new, more awesome loot are just icing on the cake.

Immortal Throne's not going to change the way you look at action/RPGs, but it breathes some new life into one of last year's better games. For my money, that's an expansion I can support.—ADAM



BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Ding ding! Here comes the loot train!

> **Graphics:** With the settings cranked, Titan Quest is a damn fine-looking game

> **Sound:** There are still odd technical issues here and there, but the sound still doesn't make a difference one way or the other

> **Playability:** You click on stuff, and it dies. No rough edges get in the way of this elegant design

> **Entertainment:** The best action/RPG in years gets an expansion. What more can you ask for?

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8

Expansion packs are frequently criticized for not adding enough to the base game—often with good cause. The catch with Titan Quest is that if you demand constant innovation and fresh experiences, you probably shouldn't be playing this game in the first place. However, if you want a great Diablo-like mixture of monsters, loot, and leveling, look no further than Immortal Throne. The new Dream mastery adds tons of satisfying new vines to mow through fodder, and the added high-level areas are great venues to humiliate mythological beasts. It may not redefine somatic hack n' slash, but Immortal Throne does exemplify everything that makes the genre so irresistible.—JOE

PC

Silverfall

> **STYLE:** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER:** ASAR > **DEVELOPER:** MONTE CRESTO > **RELEASE:** MARCH 27 > **ESRB:** T

■ You can zoom the camera in this close if you don't like viewing the action from a playable angle



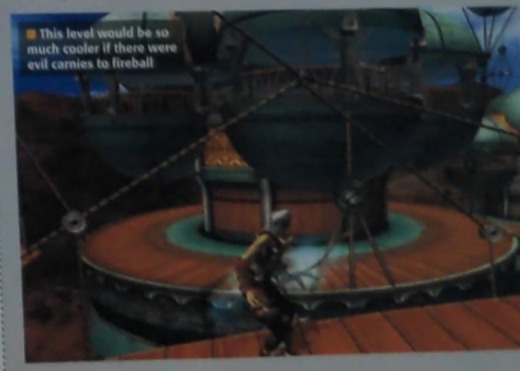
UNINSPIRED

I have no patience for knockoff games that can't even get basic concepts right. Now, I'm not someone who hates on everything that isn't a creative masterpiece, but if a game doesn't even attempt to advance the art or even iterate on a previous design, you can bet that it doesn't get any kind of break for getting the little things wrong. Silverfall may allow me to hit things over the head and take their goods, but you need more than that to keep my attention these days.

With a genre as well-trodden as hack n' slash loot-gathering, it takes one of two things to make people care about a game: outstanding execution of familiar concepts or interesting innovation. Silverfall has neither, and consequently is a title doomed before it even ships. The click-fest gameplay doesn't add anything to the Diablo model, and

the character progression is inferior to Titan Quest's. The only marginally interesting thing about Silverfall is the party mechanic, and even that is so poorly implemented that it's laughable compared even to Diablo II's mercenaries (after a few patches to that venerable game, anyway).

Silverfall is most notable for its failures in the most simple of areas. The UI is tenable on a number of levels, from the barely-visible health bar to the non-remappable key bindings. The localization is fairly bad, the options menu is bare, and the object occlusion when they're in front of the camera is bigger than it has any right to be. The font used in the majority of the game is hard to read and irritating for crying out loud! It's sad when the best thing you can say for a game is that it's not broken, but that's about as positive as I can be about Silverfall.—ADAM



■ This level would be so much cooler if there were evil carnies to fireball

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** "Yes, people save. Ward this here Diablo II game! We should make a crappy copy of it!"

> **Graphics:** None to developers. C&C-shading only works with bug, existing character designs. This is just bland and icky.

> **Sound:** As always, flares for the win

> **Playability:** Not being able to remap keys is an outrageous offense. Seriously.

> **Entertainment:** You can get your "click fest region" fix elsewhere, and with more style

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

It's easy to give one piece of advice to potential players of Silverfall, it's this: do not play as a big, rusty troll warrior. I did, and I feel five feet tall. Every time I died I had to watch her run around in a skimpy leather bodice in search of her treacherous. My primary goal was not to push the game's mature or technical edge, I simply wanted to keep Dagblat's pants on (and buy plenty of life insurance). Seriously though, Silverfall is the very definition of a gameable hack n' slash loot grind. Nothing, beautiful. Nothing spectacular. It might be worth going through with some dedicated battles over the Vats or L&A style. If you're already finished with the new Titan Quest expansion, that is.—BRYAN



S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl

PC SHOOTING FOR THE MOON

Despite nearly four years of delay, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. still feels unfinished in some respects. This is supposed to be a game about freedom, where the player can do as he or she pleases, but the game's design is so restrictive that it feels like a cage. The game's design is so restrictive that it feels like a cage. The game's design is so restrictive that it feels like a cage.

...the game's design is so restrictive that it feels like a cage. The game's design is so restrictive that it feels like a cage. The game's design is so restrictive that it feels like a cage.



BOTTOM LINE 8.25

Concept: Game and time in the post-apocalyptic world of Chernobyl. The game is a mix of action and exploration.

Graphics: Technically sound, but the limited color palette and low resolution are a bit disappointing.

Sound: Ambient sound is good, but the dialogue is hard to hear.

Playability: The game is a mix of action and exploration. The game is a mix of action and exploration.

Second Opinion 8

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is a strange beast. Fellow gamers speak in Russian and you engage them in dialogue (then they're perfectly understandable) conversation (then they appear directly over the character you are speaking with, and the plot seems scattered at best. But none of these quibbles kept the game's ominous atmosphere from pulling me in. From its radiation-poisoned fields filled with mutated animals to its desolate scientific facilities being picked over by other scavengers, the haunted landscape of post-fallout Chernobyl is a treat to explore. The game successfully blends RPG pacing with FPS action to create one of the most novel experiences I've come across in years. The player customisation feels half-baked, but combat has its own distinct flavor. Fights tend to take place over longer distances than most games, so patience and accuracy are rewarded. A premium taken as the sum of its parts, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. ultimately offers a unique experience that manages to overcome its minor flaws. —BERTZ



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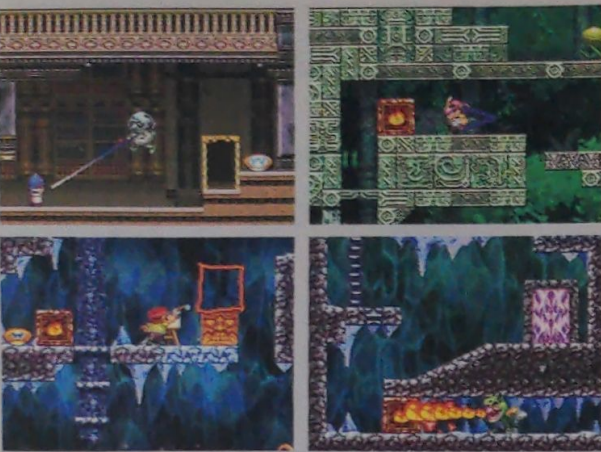
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NINTENDO DS

Wario: Master of Disguise

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER SUZAKU > RELEASE MARCH 6 > ESRB E10+

SMELL THE PURPLE WIND

The above phrase is actually what Wario tells his rivals upon besting them. You see, Purple Wind is Wario's thief code name, but it's also what he calls his fans. Yes, Wario's love of gas and treasure is well represented here.

The game takes place inside of a TV show that Wario has crashed. Stealing the main character's thieving wand has allowed Wario to change costumes at will for varying attacks and platforming powers. You can use the stylus to draw a dragon tail on his back to breathe fire or make a rectangle with a line through it to become Arty Wario and make blocks out of thin air. Early on this is a pretty quick way to change forms, but as you earn more of the eight total costumes, the input recognition gets a little muddled. For example, there were times when I drew a circle to get the astronaut but made the pirate instead. Despite the interface problems, I enjoyed the variety of powers and felt they were implemented well in the navigation of the stages.

Each of the "episodes" offer a varying level of challenge, and some can take over an hour to complete on the first runthrough. Some puzzles

make you scratch notes on a notepad like the old days of Metroid on the NES. Boss battles are plentiful, and it's usually enjoyable deducing what mix of powers to combine to defeat them (even if developer Suzaku does give you onscreen hints). Plus, this is probably the first video game in history that requires you to drop poop in a boss' mouth. Speaking of poop, one of WMOD's minigames requires players to guide falling turds into a toilet. Other tasks include coloring in pictures, connecting the dots, or crushing skittering roaches. These minigames are passable at first, but the fact that you have to complete one every single time you open a chest will have you questioning whether any treasure is worth this constant hassle. —BRYAN

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **Concept:** Touchscreen puzzle platforming with minigames bolted on

> **Graphics:** Main characters and bosses have amusing animations, but environments tend to look a little bland

> **Sound:** Lighthearted tunes and standard Wario grunts

> **Playability:** Drawing on Wario to change costumes only gets more clunky as additional outfits are unlocked

> **Entertainment:** Fun puzzle elements get bogged down by over-reliance on touchscreen features

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8

Make no mistake — this game is downright frustrating at times. While it may look like an action/platformer, Master of Disguise is heavily weighted towards the exploration and puzzle-solving side of the genre. Switching between Wario's various forms makes for some intriguing solutions, even if it's a bit difficult to get the DS to switch to the correct form. Still, despite my reservations, I kept coming back for more, and found myself wrapped up in navigating this title's obtuse levels. Bonus points for a very humorous script, which kept me in stitches as I slowly unlocked the game's secrets. It's not for everyone, but I have a feeling this will become a cult classic for some hardcore Nintendo fans. —MATT

PSP

Call of Duty: Roads to Victory

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER AMAZE ENTERTAINMENT > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB T



HONORABLE DISCHARGE

Game publishers seem to have a lot in common with Homer Simpson. Like our lovable buffoon repeatedly sticking his hand into a toaster in hopes of retrieving that half-piece of Pop Tart, suffering electrocution each time, publishers keep burning themselves by shoe-horning first-person shooters into the ill-suited PSP. Call of Duty is the latest franchise to be sacrificed to this FPS meat grinder. As you would guess given the PSP's poor track record in the genre, Roads to Victory is more akin to the mediocre Big Red One than to the superb PC and Xbox 360 offerings.

In an effort to navigate around the PSP's lack of a second analog stick, Roads to Victory offers four different control schemes. Each compromises your ability to fight effectively in its own special way, and none of them achieve a comfort level that allows for twitch kills so necessary in FPS games. To correct this problem, developer Amaze Entertainment has included an auto-aim supplement, but I found this created just as many headaches as the control scheme. There were times when I wasn't locked on a soldier, yet his head was perfectly lined up along my iron sights. I would pull the trigger, yet he would not go down. Once he was auto-targeted, however, I could shoot aimlessly at him and he would fall.

The controls are hardly the only problem facing this forlorn soldier. Anyone who has played a few WWII shooters will be all too familiar with this cookie-cutter list of tasks: take out anti-air artillery with bomb charges, counter-snipe Nazi snipers so troops can pass through an area, take out a few tanks with a Panzerschreck, rinse, and repeat. The level designs are equally predictable for the most part, with narrow corridors to navigate with Nazis waiting around each corner. The only new action this game seems to offer is a *Memphis Belle*-like level played on board a bomber that has you moving from turret to turret taking out waves of Messerschmitts.

Even the multiplayer doesn't escape this fiasco without suffering from a few shrapnel wounds. You can face off with up to six friends locally in your standard deathmatch, capture the flag, hold the flag, and king of the hill modes, but it lacks any online play. This is a huge sacrifice to make, as online multiplayer is such an integral element to the franchise's success.

Because of the PSP's inability to provide a home for a good shooter, we're willing to give Roads to Victory an honorable discharge. Now if only the publishers would break the habit of recruiting these sorry excuses for soldiers. —BERTZ

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** Mortally wound a decorated war veteran by making him serve on the PSP

> **Graphics:** Nothing you haven't seen before

> **Sound:** We've heard prettier gun fire in our days

> **Playability:** FPS controls, as we've come to expect on the PSP, suck

> **Entertainment:** Unless you're starving for a mission, skip this poor excuse for a WWII shooter

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

I think everyone knows what they're in for with a PSP version of Call of Duty: crappy controls, bad graphics, smaller environments, and maybe three different facial models. Developer Amaze Entertainment (who specializes in handheld ports) delivers on all fronts. Roads to Victory also features an inordinate amount of turret gameplay, giving players a sweet but brief taste of analog aiming. Despite these gripes, the soul of Call of Duty somehow remains intact here. Hardcore fans may want to breeze through the game on a rental, but everyone else should just wait for the inevitable COD 4. —BRYAN



PSP

After Burner: Black Falcon

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > PUBLISHER SEGA > DEVELOPER PLANET MOON > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB T

DANGER ZONE

After Burner was a big deal back in the day, but it's clear it has already used up most of its gas. Black Falcon clings to its roots, but struggles to keep up with the times.

This game is basically a rail shooter that fakes the sensation of 3D space by letting you move nominally around the screen. You know, kind of like how *Top Gun* is ostensibly about some hot-shot fighter jocks, and pretends that Tom Cruise is... Well, you know what I'm getting at. Anyway, as much as the gameplay structure puts you in a box, After Burner works pretty well within it. There are over 20 missions to grind through, and the action itself can get pretty hairy at times as both air and ground targets get thrown your way (while remaining pretty smooth). The enemy lock-ons that come up from behind (you evade them by hitting the brakes until they pass) can be particularly devastating if you're not careful. As well as the game hits its core action, its repetitive nature becomes quickly apparent. Online co-op is nice, but the competitive component is less deathmatch with dogfights as it is a game of tag.

So, unless landing on an aircraft carrier and being saluted with the "Mission Accomplished" banner is all you're looking for, you're going to have to search elsewhere for a deeper experience. —KATO

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Revive this arcade classic and stay true to its roots. And add some Planet Moon humor

> **Graphics:** A little bland, but at least the locales show some interesting details

> **Sound:** The game would hang up occasionally while switching songs, but it's not as obnoxious as the bad music itself

> **Playability:** Fluid flying with all your weapons easily accessible at your fingertips

> **Entertainment:** A rail shooter whose time has pretty much come and gone

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

This reinvention of the classic Sega arcade game sticks close to its roots, perhaps too close. While it's got a great feature set, including multiplayer co-op, attractive graphics, and a nice selection of real-world planes that you can customize, After Burner fails to really grab me. There's nothing outright wrong with this, but the controls work well enough that I started to wish that it would go off of its linear rail levels and morph into a full-out 3D flight combat game. While that might have angered After Burner diehards, I think it would have been a better choice. Still, this is solid work by developer Planet Moon. —MATT



HANDHELD QUICKIES

PSP | NINTENDO DS

Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE Q-PLAYER VIA AD HOC > PUBLISHER D3 PUBLISHER > DEVELOPER INFINITE INTERACTIVE / VICIOUS CYCLE (PSP) INFINITE INTERACTIVE / 1ST PLAYABLE (DS) > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB E10+



BOTTOM LINE 8.25

You could call this a strategy/puzzle/RPG. You take turns matching up lines of three or more orbs.

Each colored orb is worth mana, which you need to cast different spells. There are also experience, gold, and attack orbs and if you don't get those, your opponent will. Then there is the matter of managing your equipment, companions, and captured cities. If I'm making this all sound a little complicated, don't worry, that's because it is. But that's part of this game's charm, and Puzzle Quest does a nice job of slowly introducing you to all these different elements. The AI seems insanely good one minute then misses an obvious attack the next, and the story is completely throwaway, but there is enough gameplay here to keep puzzle fans busy for a long time. —BEN

NINTENDO DS

Honeycomb Beat

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER HUDSON > DEVELOPER HUDSON > RELEASE MARCH 27 > ESRB E



BOTTOM LINE 7

I think we've all played this before. You flip one shape — a hexagon here — and all the surrounding shapes flip as well. I use to love playing a game similar to this on my PC back when I was in high school. Not surprisingly, this game doesn't hold the same level of interest for me so many years later. In Evolution mode, you clear rows from a scrolling honeycomb by turning them the same color, and in Puzzle mode you have a set number of turns to make all the hexagons on a set board the same color. I liked puzzle mode the best, but wanted a little more. There is nothing else to this game. I guess you get what you pay for, but even at \$20 it would have been nice to see a two-player mode. —BEN

NINTENDO DS

Meteos: Disney Magic

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE > PUBLISHER Q ENTERTAINMENT > DEVELOPER DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS > RELEASE FEBRUARY 27 > ESRB E

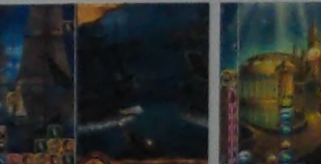


MORE BLOCKS, LESS FUN

I'm a huge fan of the original Meteos. The cartridge has never strayed far from my DS (or nowadays my DS Lite) since I bought the thing. What I hadn't realized in the last year and a half is that a substantial portion of my enjoyment of the game stems from the outstanding soundtrack that lends itself so well to each level. Meteos: Disney Magic sports nearly identical gameplay as its predecessor, but the music is so uninspired and bland that even the notable improvements to the bread and butter block-clearing can't make up for it.

This version of Meteos has you holding the DS sideways like a book, which is a very natural way to play the game given the dimensions of the touch screen. This change, and the added ability to slide blocks horizontally as well as vertically, make the gameplay even better than the original's silky-smooth action. Disney Magic also features varied rule sets among its many boards, and a bunch of unlockables and bonus content to give you a reason to keep playing. All of this is great, and on paper you'd think that this spin-off trumps the original in every way. Sadly, that is not the case.

In the first game, the music consisted of brilliant original compositions that fit the tone of each level perfectly, with stings and riffs that played dynamically according to the action onscreen. Here, you get the sense that the Disney machine has ground any creativity into a thin paste between its corporate gears, leaving only bland homogenous pap deemed suitably inoffensive for youthful consumption. In short, it sucks and makes me not want to play the game. If this were an MMORPG I'd just alt-tab and fire up iTunes, but Meteos' design demands an integrated soundscape. Lacking tunes that I enjoy listening to, Disney Magic joins *Highlander 2* and the 1992 Minnesota Twins as sequels that ought to be benched in favor of the original. —ADAM



BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Add in Disney themes to 2005's music-based falling block puzzler

> **Graphics:** Sometimes the falling blocks are animated!

> **Sound:** The music is a huge disappointment; the tunes in the first game are infinitely superior to these uninspired beats

> **Playability:** The sideways Brain Age-style orientation makes absolute sense

> **Entertainment:** An inferior soundtrack badly hurts this spinoff

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

People can look at the latest Meteos in one of two different ways: Disney fans are getting a rare treat of good game play while the Meteos camp gets a spin-off with ridiculous cartoon skins plastered everywhere. Seriously, it's like if Epic put pretty pink dresses on everybody in *Call of War 2* and gave them rainbow guns. The core gameplay still feels solid, but I was constantly annoyed by the presentation. However, the ability to slide blocks horizontally opens up some new puzzle tactics, and I like holding the DS sideways to play. After playing Disney Magic I only have one question: where's the real Meteos 2? —BRYAN



CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For February 2007 Based On Units Sold

1 CRACKDOWN (360)



We experienced a crackdown once. It all started one crazy week-end when our girlfriend said "trust me, rub this on it and it won't taste so bitter." We woke up 14 hours later in a South American jungle wearing a stewardess uniform and some ceremonial wedding beads. Is a crackdown the same as a breakdown?

2 WII PLAY (Wii)



Shortly after that we broke up with her. We didn't like the fact that she kept beating us when while we played Wii Play, and she didn't like the fact that all our farts smell like cheese. And by beating us at Wii we mean that she would smash the Wii remote across the side of our face every time we were about to win.

3 DIDDY KONG RACING (DS)



It is probably for the best that we broke up. It was an abusive relationship. She once lost a game of Diddy Kong Racing and took out her frustration by breaking her chair across our knees and then throwing feces at us. Come to think of it, she smelled a little bit like Diddy. Except her breath, which always smelled like bananas. That was what we liked about her. Wait...were we dating a monkey?

4 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS (Wii)



Maybe we were too hard on that girl. After all, she was really good at sign language and following simple instructions. Like that time we were playing Zelda and told her to stop chewing on her hair. She really listened to us. And we learned a lot from Zelda, like, how to find the true beauty locked inside hideous people, and how to put up with them otherwise.

5 GUITAR HERO II (PS2)



Baby, we're sorry about that time we almost sold your mother to that carnie. She looks better after the laser hair surgery. Come back to us. We'll even play you a sweet soft love song on Guitar Hero II. Something like "Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight" by Spinal Tap. Then we can lay in each other's arms. We'll say we love each other, and you can promise not to set us on fire again.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Crackdown	N/A	360	8.5	02-07	\$60
2	Wii Play	N/A	Wii	7	02-07	\$50
3	Diddy Kong Racing	N/A	DS	7	02-07	\$32
4	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	5	Wii	10	11-06	\$50
5	Guitar Hero II	2	PS2	9.25	11-06	\$80
6	Gears of War	3	360	9.5	11-06	\$65
7	Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	1	360	8.25	01-07	\$64
8	Major League Baseball 2K7	N/A	360	8.5	02-07	\$60
9	WarioWare: Smooth Moves	4	Wii	7.75	01-07	\$50
10	NBA Street Homecourt	N/A	360	8.75	02-07	\$60
11	New Super Mario Bros	10	PS2	9.25	05-06	\$35
12	Rainbow Six Vegas	9	360	9.5	11-06	\$65
13	Sonic and the Secret Rings	N/A	Wii	5.5	02-07	\$49
14	Madden NFL 07	6	PS2	8.25	08-06	\$30
15	Mario Kart DS	N/A	PS2	8.5	11-05	\$35
16	Resistance: Fall of Man	8	PS3	9.5	11-06	\$60
17	MLB 07: The Show	N/A	PS2	8.75	02-07	\$40
18	God of War	N/A	PS2	10	03-05	\$19
19	Final Fantasy VI Advance	N/A	GBA	9	02-07	\$33
20	Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!	11	DS	8.25	04-06	\$20

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Forecast/©TTS/© - Dead Week 116-625-2277

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Yoshi's Island DS	DS
2	Monster Hunter Portable 2nd	PSP
3	Professor Layton's Mystery Town	DS
4	Kenka Bancho 2: Full Throttle	PS2
5	Super Robot Taisen W	DS
6	Wii Sports	Wii
7	Gundam Musou	PS3
8	Dragon Quest Monsters Joker	DS
9	Wii Play	Wii
10	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain 2	DS



TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	God of War II	1	PS2
2	The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles	2	multi
3	Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	N/A	360
4	World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	3	PC
5	Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	N/A	PC
6	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	4	Wii
7	Ratchet and Clank: Size Matters	5	PSP
8	Rainbow Six Vegas	7	360
9	Crackdown Rainbow Six Vegas	8	360
10	S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	N/A	PC



The Staff's Favorite Pick

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	1	\$38
2	World of Warcraft	2	\$25
3	The Sims 2: Seasons	N/A	\$28
4	Supreme Commander	N/A	\$49
5	The Sims 2	4	\$41
6	3333 XP Games	6	\$10
7	The Sims: Life Stories	N/A	\$37
8	The Sims 2: Pets	5	\$30
9	Battlefield 2142	8	\$42
10	Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	7	\$49



Based On Monthly Units Sold

REVIEWSARCHIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

Armored Core 4	6.5	Apr-07
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWI	7	Feb-07
Call of Duty 3	8.75	Jan-07
Def Jam: Fight for NY	7.75	Mar-07
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, The	9.5	Apr-07
Final Fantasy X-2	9	Jan-07
Formula One: Championship Edition	8	Apr-07



Virtua Fighter 5 - PS3 - Mar-07	8	Mar-07
Full Auto 2: Battlelines	7.5	Jan-07
Genji: Days of the Blade	6	Dec-06
Hidden NFL 07	7.75	Jan-07
Major League Baseball 2K7	8.5	Mar-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire	3.75	Dec-06
MotorStorm	8	Apr-07
NBA 07	7	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8	Jan-07
NBA Street Homecourt	8.75	Mar-07
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 2K7	8.25	Jan-07
Resistance: Fall of Man	9.5	Dec-06
Ridge Racer 7	8	Dec-06
Sonic the Hedgehog	6.75	Jan-07
Tony Hawk's Project 8	8.75	Jan-07
Unlabeled: Dark Kingdom	8.25	Jan-07
Virtua Fighter 5	8	Mar-07

XBOX 360

Armored Core 4	6.5	Apr-07
Battlestations: Midway	6.5	Mar-07
Bullet Witch	6	Mar-07
Call of Duty 3	8.5	Dec-06
College Hoops 2K7	8	Feb-07
Crackdown	8.5	Mar-07
Dance Dance Revolution Universe	7.5	Apr-07
Dead or Alive Xtreme 2	7.5	Jan-07
Def Jam: Fight for NY	7.75	Mar-07
Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles, The	9.5	Apr-07
FEAR	8.5	Dec-06
FIFA Soccer 07	7.25	Dec-06
Fuzion Frenzy 2	2	Apr-07
Gears of War	9.5	Dec-06
Guitar Hero II	9.25	Apr-07
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	8.25	Feb-07
Major League Baseball 2K7	8.5	Mar-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8.25	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	5.25	Dec-06
NBA Street Homecourt	8.75	Mar-07
NCAA 07 March Madness	7.75	Feb-07
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Samurai Warriors 2: Empires	4.75	Apr-07
Sonic the Hedgehog	6.75	Jan-07
Splinter Cell: Double Agent	9	Dec-06
Star Trek Legacy	7.75	Jan-07
Superman Returns	6	Jan-07
Test Drive Unlimited	8.25	Nov-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas	9.5	Jan-07
Tony Hawk's Project 8	9	Dec-06
UEFA Champions League 2006-2007	7.5	Apr-07
Viva Pinata	8	Jan-07
Winning Eleven	8	Mar-07
Pro Evolution Soccer 2007	8	Mar-07
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06

GAMECUBE

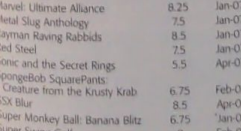
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Baten Kaitos: Origins	7	Nov-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06

XBOX

Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Dec-06
Destroy All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	7.5	Nov-06
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Scarface: The World is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Thriller	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06

PC

Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs	7	Dec-06
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Battlefield 2142	8.5	Nov-06
Destiny	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07



World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade - PC - Apr-07	9.75	Apr-07
Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs	7	Dec-06
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Battlefield 2142	8.5	Nov-06
Destiny	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07
Destiny: The Fallen	6.5	Mar-07

PLAYSTATION 2

Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Ar Tonelico: Melody of Elemia	6.75	Feb-07
Arena Football: Road to Glory	6.5	Apr-07
Arthur and the Invisibles	6.75	Mar-07
ATV Offroad Fury 4	7.5	Jan-07
Bully	8.5	Dec-06
Burnout Dominator	8	Apr-07
Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Dec-06
Chulip	3	Apr-07
Destroy All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Dot Hack/G.U. Vol. 1/Rebirth	5.75	Dec-06
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
Fast and the Furious, The	6	Nov-06
Final Fantasy XII	9.25	Nov-06
Ghost Rider	6.75	Mar-07
God Hand	6	Nov-06
God of War II	9.75	Apr-07
Guitar Hero II	9	Dec-06
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
Lumines Plus	7.5	Apr-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
MLB 07: The Show	8.75	Apr-07
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
MVP 07 NCAA Baseball	7	Mar-07
NBA 07	7.5	Nov-06
NBA 2K7	8	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	7.5	Nov-06
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NFL Street 3	7	Feb-07
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Rogue Galaxy	9	Jan-07
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Scarface: The World is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Sega Genesis Collection	8.5	Jan-07
Shield, The	4	Mar-07
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner	7.75	Dec-06
Shining Force EXA	7.5	Apr-07
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Combined Assault	6.5	Jan-07
Sopranos: Road to Respect, The	6	Feb-07
Star Trek Encounters	7.25	Jan-07
Tales of the Abyss	7.25	Nov-06
Thriller	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tokobot Plus	7.25	Dec-06
Mysteries of the Karakuri	7.25	Dec-06
Winning Eleven	8	Mar-07
Pro Evolution Soccer 2007	8	Mar-07
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06

Heroes of Might & Magic V: Hammers of Fate	8	Feb-07
Land of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II - Rise of the Witch-King, The	8	Feb-07
Maelstrom	4	Mar-07
Mage Knight Apocalypse	6	Dec-06
Medieval II: Total War	9.25	Jan-07
Neverwinter Nights 2	8	Dec-06
Paradise	7	Dec-06
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Sid Meier's Railroads!	8	Dec-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
Star Wars: Empire at War: Forces of Corruption	7.5	Dec-06
Supreme Commander	9	Apr-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	7.5	Apr-07
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Dark Crusade	8.75	Dec-06
World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	9.75	Apr-07

NINTENDO DS	8	Apr-07
Brain Buster Puzzle Pak	8	Apr-07
Diddy Kong Racing	7	Mar-07
Elite Beat Agents	6.75	Dec-06
Final Fantasy III	8	Dec-06
Gurps	7.75	Dec-06
Hotel Dusk: Room 215	7	Mar-07
Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja	5.5	Apr-07
Kirby Squeak Squad	7.75	Feb-07
Konducta	6.25	Feb-07
Lunar Knights	8	Apr-07
Mage Knight: Destiny's Solder	4.5	Dec-06
Magical Starship	6.5	Nov-06
Mario vs. Donkey Kong 2: March of the Minis	6	Nov-06
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice For All	8	Jan-07
Pogo Island	6.5	Apr-07
Pokemon Ranger	5	Dec-06
Quickshot	7.5	Apr-07
Scourge: Hive	7.5	Nov-06
Spectrobes	6.5	Apr-07
Touch Detective	6.75	Nov-06
Troncube	6	Apr-07
Yoshi's Island DS	8.25	Dec-06

PSP	6.25	Apr-07
300: March to Glory	6.25	Nov-06
50 Cent Bulletproof: G Unit Edition	6.25	Nov-06
Ace Combat X: Skies of Deception	8.25	Dec-06
Bounty Hounds	6.25	Nov-06
Capcom Puzzle World	7.5	Apr-07
Chik'n Car: Carnage	7	Apr-07
Death II: 2: Root of Evil	8.25	Nov-06

Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters - PSP - Apr-07	9	Apr-07
Dungeon Siege: Throne of Agony	8	Jan-07
Dynasty Warriors Vol.2	5	Dec-06
EA Replay	6.75	Dec-06
Every Extend Extra	8.25	Nov-06
Gangs of London	6	Nov-06
Gitaroo Man Lives!	9	Dec-06
Godfather: Mob Wars, The	4.5	Dec-06
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories	7.5	Dec-06
Gun Showdown	7.75	Dec-06
Gunpey	7	Apr-07
Gurps: A Monstrous Adventure	7.25	Nov-06
Killzone: Liberation	7.25	Nov-06
Legend of Heroes III: The Sword of the Ocean, The	6	Mar-07
Lumines II	9	Dec-06
Medal of Honor Heroes	6.75	Dec-06
Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops	9	Feb-07
Monster Kingdom Jewel Summoner	6	Mar-07
Mortal Kombat: Unchained	8	Feb-07
Power Stone Collection	7.75	Nov-06
Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters	9	Apr-07
Sal Meier's Pirates!	9	Apr-07
SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fire Team Bravo 2	7.5	Jan-07
Sonic: Rivals	6.75	Feb-07
Spectral Souls	5.5	Nov-06
Star Wars: Lethal Alliance	6.5	Feb-07
Valhalla Knights	4.5	Mar-07
Warhammer: Battle for Alanya	2.5	Feb-07
Warriors: The WIT	8.5	Apr-07
Warriors: The WIT	7	Nov-06

GAME BOY ADVANCE	8	Jan-07
Final Fantasy V Advance	8	Apr-07
Final Fantasy VI Advance	9	Apr-07
Summon Knight: Swordcraft Story 2	7.25	Jan-07
Yggdra Union	7.25	Feb-07



"I can more about the fight for first



CLASSICGI

Where The Past Comes Alive

“WAR. WAR. NEVER CHANGES...”

A LOOK BACK AT THE FALLOUT SERIES



As the dulcet tones of the 1940s hit band The Ink Spots croon their romantic melody from our computer speakers, we see the black and white display of two metal-clad soldiers and an unfortunate man who kneels in front of them. They shoot him in the back of the head, then wave happily to the audience back home as the tune calmly rolls on. We pan back from the screen to see we've been watching a 1950s era TV. It sits in an empty apartment, in a blown out building, in an obliterated city. This was every player's first glance at Fallout, the 1997 role-playing game that helped to set new bars for cinematic storytelling and open-ended decision-making. With anticipation on the rise for Bethesda's announced tackling of Fallout 3, we thought we'd take a look back at this remarkable title and the series it spawned to see if Fallout still holds up 10 years after its release.

"I always wanted to do a sequel to Wasteland. But we didn't own the trademark — Electronic Arts did," explains Brian Fargo, CEO of inXile Entertainment, the developer of the recent console version of The Bard's Tale. Ten years ago, Fargo held the same position at Interplay, where he helped initiate Fallout. Wasteland had been another post-apocalyptic game produced by

Fargo in 1988 for emerging publishing giant EA. Several years later, with Interplay now a direct publishing rival, a sequel was out of the question. Its spiritual successor would come to be called Fallout. Culling inspiration from movies like *Mad Max* and books such as Stephen King's *The Stand* and Robert R. McCammon's *Swan Song*, Fargo

began work on a 10-point vision for what Fallout should become. Early on, that concept became a united focus for the major creative voices that would shape the title — Feargus Urquhart, Tim Cain, Leonard Boyarsky, and Jason D. Anderson. "It was definitely a shared vision. It's hard to create great product

unless you have a group of people who are passionate about what they're doing," Fargo tells us, crediting such innovations as the retro '50s art style to Boyarsky. "That's the good thing about the creative process. If you get everybody involved at the right levels and let the right ideas rise to the top, you get something greater than any one person could do."

The game that emerged was unlike its contemporary RPGs in more ways than one. Set in a dark prediction of the 22nd century, Fallout fully satirized that strange era of post-WWII Cold War fears, with its xenophobic bomb shelters and falsely optimistic promises of life after the

next great war. Players adopted the role of a vault dweller, one of the lucky survivors who had gotten into a vast underground facility before the nuclear holocaust that devastated the world. When the vault's water chip breaks, someone must venture into the outside world for the first time in years to find a replacement. In the desolate wasteland that used to be southern California, players could wander in any direction they wanted to complete their quest, and engage in any number of shady and questionable tactics to succeed. "We wanted to have moral ambiguity wherever we could," Fargo relays. "The world is not black and white. So we loved putting people in situations where they're torn as to what to do." One scene in the game allowed gamers to play the local organized crime boss against the police. You could complete several assassinations for the dangerous mob leader, collect the cash, then run to the police and turn over evidence, carefully leaving out your involvement in the killings. Scenes like these were a far cry from the

quest that other RPGs were offering at the time. From beginning to end, a focus remained on letting players interact with the world in the way they wanted to, whether that meant heartless violence, careful diplomacy, or artful stealth. However you progressed through this early take on a sandbox RPG world, it became clear that a greater danger than a broken computer component was looming. As a rising mutant threat began to

rear up out of the wastelands, it was the vault dweller that had to step up and find a solution.

Fallout played as a straightforward turn-based RPG. Players were free to wander until combat began, when a regimented action point system would dictate how far someone could move in a turn, and what attacks or other actions they could take. Bearing everything from crowbars and sledgehammers to sniper rifles and plasma pistols, combat rolled forward through visceral descriptions of different attacks scrolling into the lower window and frequent gory death animations. Backing up this smooth combat interface was a character creation and upgrade system specially designed for Fallout — SPECIAL, an acronym that relayed a character's strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck. A set of point-based skills and special powers called perks rounded out the character, a herald of some of the most popular RPG systems of later years. What many people don't



know is how close the game came to using an already popularized RPG system. "We actually had a deal with Steve Jackson Games. We were going to use GURPS [Generic Universal Role-Playing System]," reveals Fargo. "What happened was that we started giving him things to look at, including the famous opening sequence with the Ink Spots and shooting the guy, which we just thought was a wonderful moment." For

Jackson, it was a level of violence he was unwilling to be associated with, and demanded that it be removed. Fargo continues: "That moment defines the title. That is what this title is about. So I said, 'You know what? We're going to cancel the license.' So that's why we just walked away."

As much as we respected Steve Jackson Games and the GURPS system, we just weren't going to compromise the integrity of what we wanted to create with Fallout. With the success of the first game, it wasn't long before talk of a second title began to surface. To hear Brian Fargo tell it, it was a challenging time at Interplay. "It was a real rough start on that one — and very frustrating for me," Fargo tells us. "Fallout 2 was very painful to get going." By Fargo's account, the second project began with Cain, Boyarsky, and Anderson beginning work on ideas other than Fallout, such that some of the rank and file members of the original team were thrust into the role of starting a sequel. A few months later, Fargo details that the original designers returned, only to scrap most of the work the rest of the team had started on. And only a few months after that, those key development figures told Fargo they would be leaving to start their own company, Troika, at which point creative control reverted to the team that had first begun work on the sequel. For their part, the founders of Troika have previously been on record as being unable to agree with Interplay about how the team for a sequel would be structured — they were unhappy with the direction Interplay was going at the time, and ready to pursue their own ventures. Regardless of disagreements and splits at the company, Fallout 2 was eventually released on a hungry fan base to largely positive reviews. Some



■ In *Fallout 1* and *2*, players could recruit a number of characters into their party who would independently act to help out in a fight

critiques of that second game over the years find fault with discrepancies in the storytelling, and Fargo credits those problems to the rocky beginning the game faced.

If nothing else, Fallout 2 advanced the mythology in an exciting direction, detailing a time period many years after the end of the first game. After being



■ *Fallout* had multiple endings, each of which reflected a different play style and approach to the moral conundrums of the game



■ Combat was turn-based and extremely challenging, with enemies that ranged from human raiders to giant super mutants

rejected by the Vault he had saved in the first game, the hero traveled north, there to begin his own settlement. Generations later, when a drought threatens that quiet village, it is the vault dweller's own descendant who is sent out to find a solution. With the now antiquated instruments and apparel of his ancestor, the player sets out as this new hero to find a solution — only to become embroiled in a larger conflict involving the now sinister remnants of the United States government. This second game maintained most of the themes of post-apocalyptic survival and dark humor that the first title had introduced. While it shared many of the



■ *Vault 13* was the starting point of the game — a giant underground shelter where survivors of a nuclear holocaust had lived for years

same art assets and gameplay, it included even more complicated moral dilemmas, dealing with prostitution, drug use, and contract killing as major elements in the world. With the freedom to explore these and any number of other options, Fallout 2 advanced the concept put forth in its predecessor — let the player do what he or she wants. It was a concept that would come to dominate North American RPG design in the coming years.

Other games would follow in the coming



■ The main character of the second game was a descendant of the original hero, and like his ancestor begins his mission to save his isolated home



■ The SPECIAL character system was flexible and well balanced, even if some of the skills seemed to have more value and importance than others

years. Fallout Tactics, developed by a new studio called Micro Forté, focused on a much more strategic approach to the post-nuclear universe, saw a console release in 2004. However, for fans, the most exciting news for the franchise is still on

its way. In mid-2004, Bethesda, creators of the renowned Elder Scrolls franchise, announced it had acquired the rights to create new Fallout games from the financially troubled Interplay. Details on the game remain under wraps other than hints that the game will utilize an approach similar to Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. We interviewed Todd Howard, executive producer at Bethesda on Fallout 3, and asked him his thoughts about the original games. "Fallout was the kind of game we love — you make a character you want, and then go do whatever you want. And it rewarded you for doing so. Want to start shooting everyone and play the game that way? Go for it," Howard tells us. "Add to that one of the most unique gameworlds ever conceived — the perfect mix of retro-'50s science-fiction optimism and the harsh aftermath of a nuclear war, and you get a game like no other."

As the former head of the company that first began the Fallout franchise, we asked Brian Fargo about his thoughts on Bethesda and their handling of the new game. "There are not that many companies that could take that legacy and run with it. I think they're a great fit for it. I'm glad it ended up there." With the blessing of one of its original creators intact, it remains to be seen exactly what directions Bethesda will take the fan favorite franchise. With such a rabid following invested in the series a full decade after its first release, we questioned Fargo about what makes the games so memora-

ble. "To me it was the open world environment, the true sense of cause and effect, the acting was very strong, the writing was adult, the mood was just perfect, it had a great ending — it was the perfect storm of all those things, and there was really nothing else like it at the time. It was something unique." ■ ■ ■

GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

By Javier Gutierrez

THE ELDER SCROLLS III: MORROWIND

FORMAT: XBOX

PUBLISHER: BETHESDA

The greatest game of all time is Elder Scrolls III for Xbox. This game looked dumb when I saw the cover, but when I started to read the back of the game it looked sweet. This was the first RPG I had ever played. Before that I did not know what an RPG was. You can do anything in this game — if you do not have

any weapons, you steal some from a shop. You can travel a huge world that you are never bored in because you always have something to do. Every character has their own special abilities. You can be a cat-like person, a lizard, a monk, an elf, and other characters. This game has great graphics for the Xbox and PC — the water effects are great.

This is a good game with a good story. You live your own life. You change with every action you do. This game sounds like *Fable* but is way better with a bargain price. *Fable* was a big disappointment. Elder Scrolls III was the game of the year and *Fable* was not. It has won much respect from RPG fans. This game has everything. It has ghosts, monsters, zombies, vampires, and huge creatures. It also has tunnels, caves, huge waters, huge lands — there is everything in this game. It's a fun game to play if you like RPGs. This game is what made me a gamer. It has lands that take longer than a week to travel to. You will never feel bored when you play this game. Elder Scrolls should be named the greatest RPG of the last generation. If you don't know what an RPG is, pick up a copy of this game and it will show you what an RPG is. This is my favorite game of all time and is my favorite RPG of all time.

THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

May of 1998 saw the release of *Panzer Dragon Saga* to the Saturn, often hailed as the finest example of a role-playing game to ever grace a Sega system (sorry, Shenmue fans). The huge four-disc game detailed a story about a boy named Edge and his

dragon companion. With a combat system that combined traditional menu navigation with flight simulation, *Panzer Dragon Saga* stood apart from its RPG contemporaries.



SNES

PILOTWINGS

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE 1991

Have you ever dreamed of flying? Do you dare to take the first steps to earn your license? So begins this classic flight simulator that many received packed in with their SNES so many years ago. Pilotwings is probably best known for its liberal use of Mode 7 scaling and rotating. The game isn't true 3D so all the scenery is painted to the ground, but there is a certain charm to this. Like all older games that tried to simulate 3D, the controls take some getting used to, but Pilotwings manages to pull them off better than a lot of those others did, and you get the hang of it in no time. That doesn't mean the game gets easy. In earning your wings you'll get to pilot planes, gliders, jetpacks, and parachute out of the sky. Landing is always the hardest part, and oddly enough nailing the landing is what keeps you coming back. There are only 8 lessons and 2 bonus missions, but retrying the challenges to get better scores is what gives this game some legs. Even after all these years, maybe your dream of flying can come true.



PC

KING'S QUEST VI: HEIR TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > PUBLISHER SIERRA > DEVELOPER SIERRA > RELEASE 1992

If you ever hear people say how they miss the glory days of adventure gaming, King's Quest VI is precisely the kind of title they're pining for. Before Warcraft and The Sims, King's Quest was one of the biggest franchises on the PC. Telling the tale of a young Prince stranded on a cluster of fantastic islands, this entry exemplifies everything that was great about adventure gaming. Unlike some recent adventure games, KQ VI doesn't resort to obtuse inventory puzzles; there is a logical way around everything barring your progression, assuming you can obtain the right items. Throw iceberg lettuce into the boiling pond, use a red scarf to agitate the minotaur, and paint a magical door on the blank castle wall. Intuitive and perfectly paced, this was the final KQ to use the "move, look, take, and talk" interface that was rampant in the early '90s. Thankfully, Vivendi recently released a compilation of the first seven King's Quest titles that runs on Windows XP, so now is a great time to go back and revisit this classic.



NES

TECMO SUPER BOWL

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS > PUBLISHER TECMO > DEVELOPER TECMO > RELEASE 1991

While the original Tecmo Bowl may be remembered as the first great console football title, its successor, Tecmo Super Bowl, is the franchise's crown jewel. TSB was the first football game to incorporate every NFL team, offer a full season of gameplay, allow in-game substitutions, and record a full season's worth of statistics. Do these features sound familiar to you Madden fans? The game brings you back to a golden era of the NFL, when the Patriots and Colts still sucked and players had Mad Libs names like Louis Lipps, Babe Laufenberg, and Ickey Woods. Taking your favorite team through a season is still a blast, even if it essentially boils down to padding stats against the inferior AI. Watching players bounce off bruising running backs like Christian "The Nigerian Nightmare" Okoye and stapling quarterbacks to the turf still hasn't gotten old, even though the gameplay is much more simplistic than current football games. Playing against other humans is even better, which is why so many competitive emulation leagues can be found online. This is the kind of game destined for a rebirth on Xbox Live Arcade or the PlayStation Network. Come on Tecmo, what are you waiting for?

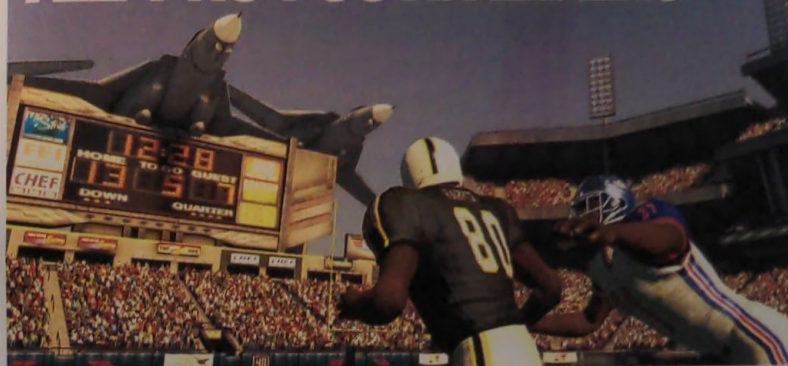


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ALL-PRO FOOTBALL 2K8



Disenchanted Madden fans and ESPN NFL 2K5 faithful will want to check out our full interview with Visual Concepts president Greg Thomas, where he dishes the knowledge about 2K Sports' newest football title and more.



Fallout Windfall

Miller sits down with Interplay founder and current inXile CEO Brian Fargo to reminisce about the production of the critically acclaimed post-apocalyptic game franchise Fallout.



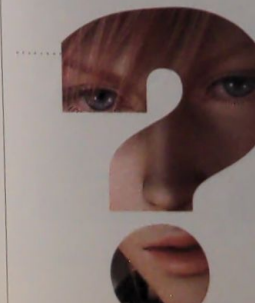
Start Your Engines

Forza Motorsport 2 game director Dan Greenawalt filled us in with the latest intel on Microsoft's highly anticipated racer. Read the full interview online.



Touch The Dead

"Who cares about box art," you say? We do, especially when we get the chance to speak briefly with Touch The Dead artist Arthur Suydam, the comic book illustrator best known for his cover work for Marvel Zombies.



ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

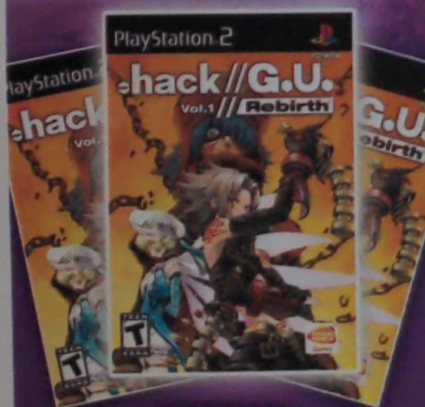
Game Informer Online travels the world to cover the circuit of gamers' days. Learn all about new game announcements from publishers like Sony, EA, Capcom, and Sony Online Entertainment. Billy and Nick also head to Japan to cover a special event hosted by Square Enix that promises a big reveal. Our fingers are crossed for a new Final Fantasy.

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GAMEOVER

"What A Terrible Night For A Curse"

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Video game stars aren't all about action – they're also about style. Character designers make sure that our protagonists are wielding the coolest weapons and wearing the hottest duds. Unfortunately, one key accessory is often left out: the hat. Answer the questions below to determine which degrading and humiliating noggin-topper we put on Ben!

1 We all know that Dante's pistols are called Ebony and Ivory, but as an unlockable character in the first Devil May Cry, Sparda's guns also have unique names. What are they?

- A. Luce and Ombra
- B. Dante and Vergil
- C. Mary Kate and Ashley
- D. Salvation and Perdition

4 What MMORPG terminology is also the name of the Wanderer's horse in Shadow of the Colossus?

- A. Mankrik's Wife
- B. Aggro
- C. Dot
- D. Buff



5 In Metal Gear Solid 3, what is the The Boss' code name among the Cobras, signifying the emotion she carries into battle?

- A. The Sorrow
- B. The Rage
- C. The Joy
- D. The Peace

6 What was Sega's not-so-revolutionary technology that, according to the marketing for Sonic the Hedgehog 2, allowed the Genesis to handle the game's extreme speed?

- A. Blast Processing
- B. Burst Processing
- C. Blink Processing
- D. Burrito Processing



3 In Tomb Raider II for the PSone, what is the setting for the first level?

- A. Atlantis
- B. The canals of Venice
- C. The Amazon jungle
- D. The Great Wall of China

7 Playing your favorite shows must be better than watching them, right? Which of these current TV programs does not already have a video game adaptation on retail shelves?

- A. Battlestar Galactica
- B. Lost
- C. CSI Miami
- D. 24

8 This screen is taken from what NES game controlled via the Zapper?

- A. Hogan's Alley
- B. Duck Hunt
- C. Gumshoe
- D. Operation Wolf



9 Only one of the following games was made by BioWare, the developer known for titles like Jade Empire and Mass Effect. Which one is it?

- A. Full Throttle
- B. Rise of the Robots
- C. MDK2
- D. Icewind Dale

10 True or False: Brute Force?

- A. False



BREAKDOWN

99.9% of gamers just don't care about Radagast the Brown

7.5 Million ants, all piled up and pressing against your front door, still probably couldn't break it down

4 points is not very many points

18% of your skin is actually made of paper. That's why you are able write on it with pens and markers

80% of this month's Breakdown facts are either made up or inaccurate. This is the one exception

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1:
Naruto's Headband



2-3:
Mega Man's Dumb Helmet



4-5:
JCO Horns



6-7:
Tingle's Unilard



8-9:
Daxter



10:
Green Bay Packers Helmet

Video Game Trivia Answers: 1A2B3D4B5C6A7B8C9C10A

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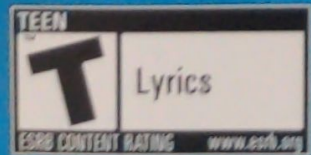
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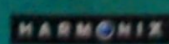
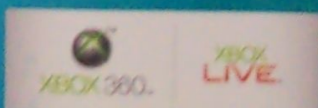
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PlayStation 2



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